Rival Pitchers of Oakdale

MORGAN SCOTT

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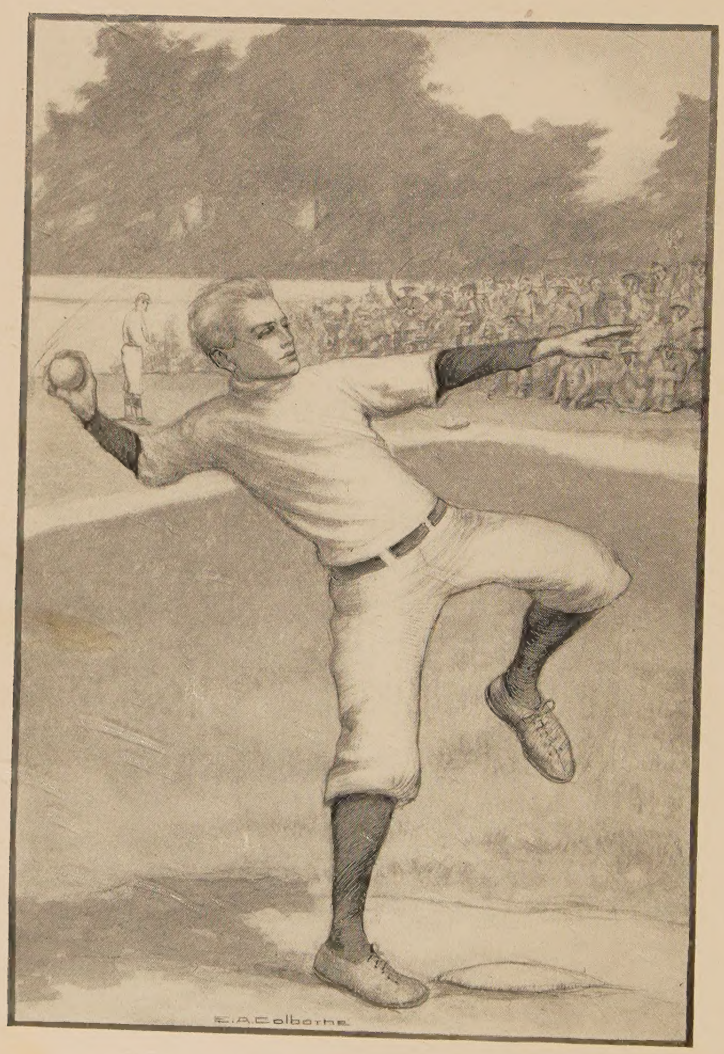

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RIVAL PITCHERS OF OAKDALE

BY
MORGAN SCOTT
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With Four Original Illustrations
By ELIZABETH COLBORNE

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RIVAL PITCHERS OF OAKDALE

CHAPTER I.

THE BOY WHO WANTED TO PITCH.

During the noon intermission of a sunny April day a small group of boys assembled near the steps of Oakdale Academy to talk baseball; for the opening of the season was at hand, and the germ of the game had already begun to make itself felt in their blood. Roger Eliot, the grave, reliable, steady-headed captain of the nine, who had scored such a pronounced success as captain of the eleven the previous autumn, was the central figure of that gathering. Chipper Cooper, Ben Stone, Sleuth Piper, Chub Tuttle, Sile Crane and Roy Hooker formed the remainder of the assemblage.

"The field will be good and dry to-night, fellows," said Roger, "and we ought to get in some much-needed practice for that game with Barville. I want every fellow to come out, sure."

"Ho!" gurgled Chub Tuttle, cracking a peanut and dexterously flipping the double kernel into his mouth. "We'll be there, though I don't believe we need much practice to beat that Barville bunch. We ate 'em up last year."

"We!" said Sleuth Piper reprovingly. "If my memory serves me, you warmed the bench in both those games."

"That wasn't my fault," retorted Tuttle cheerfully. "I was ready and prepared to play. I was on hand to step in as a pinch hitter, or to fill any sort of a gap at a moment's notice."

"A pinch hitter!" whooped little Chipper Cooper. "Now, you would have cut a lot of ice as a pinch hitter, wouldn't you? You never made a hit in a game in all your life, Chub, and you know you were subbing simply because Roy got on his ear and wouldn't play. We had to have some one for a spare man."

"I would have played," cut in Hooker sharply,

somewhat resentfully, "if I'd been given a square deal. I wanted a chance to try my hand at some of the pitching; but, after that first game, Ames, the biggest mule who ever captained a team, wouldn't give me another show. I wasn't going to play right field or sit around on the bench as a spare man."

Hooker had a thin, sharp face, with eyes set a trifle too close together, and an undershot jaw, which gave him a somewhat pugnacious appearance. He was a chap who thought very well indeed of himself and his accomplishments, and held a somewhat slighting estimation of others. In connection with baseball, he had always entertained an overweening ambition to become a pitcher, although little qualified for such a position, either by temperament or acquired skill. True, he could throw the curves, and had some speed, but at his best he could not find the plate more than once out of six times, and, when disturbed or rattled, he was even worse. Like many another fellow, he erroneously believed that the ability to throw a curved ball was a pitcher's chief accomplishment.

"It was lucky Springer developed so well as a twirler last year," observed Eliot.

"Lucky!" sneered Hooker. "Why, I don't recollect that he did anything worth bragging about. He lost both those games against Wyndham."

"We had to depend on him alone," said Roger; "and he was doing too much pitching. It's a wonder he didn't ruin his arm."

"You've got to have some one beside Springer this year, that's sure," said Hooker. "He can't pitch much more than half the games scheduled."

"Phil's tryin' to coach Rod Grant to pitch," put in Sile Crane. "I see them at it last night, out behind Springer's barn."

Roy Hooker laughed disdainfully. "Oh, that's amusing!" he cried. "That Texan has never had any experience, but, just because he and Phil have become chummy, Springer's going to make a pitcher out of him. He'll never succeed in a thousand years."

"Here they come now," said Ben Stone, as two boys turned in at the gate of the yard; "and Phil has got the catching mitt with him. I'll bet they've been practicing this noon."

"Jinks! but they're getting thick, them two," chuckled Chub Tuttle.

"As thick as merlasses in Jinuary," drawled Sile Crane whimsically.

"Being thick as molasses, they're naturally sweet on each other," chirped Cooper.

"Hi! Hi!" cried Tuttle. "There you go! Have a peanut for that."

"No, nut for me; I shell nut take it," declined Chipper.

"It's a real case of Damon and Pythias," remarked Stone, watching the two lads coming up the walk.

"Or David and Jonathan," said Eliot.

Phil Springer, the taller of the pair, with light hair, blue eyes, and long arms, looked at a distance the better qualified to toe the slab in a baseball game; but Rodney Grant was a natural athlete, whose early life on his father's Texas ranch had given him abounding health, strength, vitality, and developed in him qualities of resourcefulness and determination. Grant had come to Oakdale late the previous autumn, and was living

with his aunt, an odd, seclusive spinster, by the name of Priscilla Kent.

Two girls, sauntering down the path with their arms about each other, met the approaching boys, and paused a moment to chat with them.

"Phil's sister is struck on our gay cowboy," observed Cooper, grinning.

"I rather guess Lela Barker is some smit on him, too," put in Sile Crane. "That's sorter natteral, seein' as how he rescued her from drowndin' when she was carried over the dam on a big ice-cake in the Jinuary freshet. That sartainly made him the hero of Oakdale, and us fellers who'd been sayin' he was a fake had to pull in our horns."

"The real hero of that occasion," declared Hooker maliciously, "was a certain cheap chap by the name of Bunk Lander, who plunged into the rapids below the dam, with a rope tied round his waist, and saved them both."

"I wouldn't sneer about Lander, if I were you, Roy," said Eliot in grave reproof. "I wouldn't call him cheap, for he's shown himself to be a pretty decent fellow; and Stickney, whose store

he once pilfered, has given him a job on his new delivery wagon. There's evidently more manhood and decency in Lander than any of us ever dreamed—except Grant, who took up with him at the very beginning."

"And a fine pair people around here thought they were," flung back Hooker exasperatedly. "Why, even you, yourself, didn't have much of anything to say for Rod Grant at one time."

"I was mistaken in my estimation of him," confessed Roger unhesitatingly. "I believe Stone was about the only person who really sized Grant up right."

"And now, since he's become popular, this hero from Texas chooses Springer for his chum instead of Stone," said Roy.

"He has a right to choose whoever he pleases," said Ben, flushing a trifle. "We are still good friends. If he happens to find Springer more congenial than I, as a chum, I'm not going to show any spleen about it."

"It's my opinion," persisted Hooker, "that he has an object in his friendliness with Phil Springer. He's got the idea into his head that

he can pitch, and he's using Phil to learn what he can. Well, we'll see how much he does at it—we'll see."

The girls having passed on, the two boys now approached the group near the steps. Springer was beaming as he came up.

"Say, Captain Eliot," he cried, "the old broncho bub-buster has got onto the drop. He threw it first-rate to-day noon. I'll make a change pitcher out of him yet."

"Oh, I'm destined to become another Mathewson, I opine," said Rodney Grant laughingly; "but if I do turn out to be a phenom, I'll owe it to my mentor, Mr. Philip Springer."

"The team is coming out for practice to-night," said Eliot, "and we'll give you a chance to pitch for the batters. We've got to work up a little teamwork before that game Saturday."

The second bell clanged, and, still talking baseball, the boys moved slowly and reluctantly toward the cool, dark doorway of the academy. Roy Hooker lingered behind, a pouting, dissatisfied expression upon his face.

"So they're bound to crowd me out again, are they?" he muttered. "Well, we'll see what comes of it. If I get a chance, I'll cook that cowboy for butting in."

CHAPTER II.

BASEBALL PRACTICE.

With the close of the afternoon session, many of the boys, palpitantly eager to get out onto the field, went racing and shouting, down through the yard and across the gymnasium, where their baseball suits were kept. Eliot followed more sedately, yet with quickened step, for he was not less eager than his more exuberant teammates. Berlin Barker, slender, cold, and sometimes disposed to be haughty and overbearing, joined him on his way.

"We'll soon be at it again," said Barker. "The season opens Saturday, and I have a feeling it's going to be a hot one. It wouldn't surprise me if we had to play a stiff game in order to take a fall out of Barville. You know, they developed a strong pitcher in that man Sanger, the last of the season. Why, he actually held Wyndham down to three hits in that last game, and Barville

would have won only for the blow-up in the eighth inning."

Roger nodded. "Lee Sanger certainly did good work for Barville after he hit his pace; but Springer ought to be in good shape for the opening, not having been compelled to pitch his wing stiff, the way he did last year."

"Confidentially, Roger," said Berlin, "I've never regarded Springer as anything great. I wouldn't say this to any one else, for we are good friends; but I fancy you know his weak points. He's not a stayer; he never was, and he never will be. With the game coming his way, he's pretty good—especially so, as long as he can keep the bases clean; but one or two hits at a critical moment puts him up in the air, and he's liable to lose his head. Only for the way you steady him down behind the pan, he'd never show up half as well as he does."

Now, this was a truth which no one knew better than Eliot himself, although he had never whispered it to a living soul. Springer owed his success mainly to the heady work, good backstopping, clever coaching and steadying influence

of Eliot, who did nearly all the thinking for Phil while the latter was on the slab. This, however, is often the case with many pitchers who are more than passably successful; to the outsider, to the watcher from the stand or the bleachers, the pitcher frequently seems to be the man who is pitting his brains and skill against the brains and skill of the opposing batters and delivering the goods, when the actual fact remains that it is the man at the "receiving end" who is doing nine-tenths of the thinking, and without whose discernment, sagacity, skill and directing ability, the twirler would make a pitiful show of himself. There are pitchers who recognize this fact and have the generosity to acknowledge it; but in most cases, especially with youngsters, no matter how much he may owe to the catcher, the slab-man takes all the credit, and fancies he deserves it.

"Oh, Springer's all right," declared Roger loyally; "but, of course, he needs some one to do part of the work, so that he won't use himself up, and I have hopes that he'll succeed in coaching

Grant into a good second string man. He's enthusiastic, you know; says Grant is coming."

"Queer how chummy those fellows have become," laughed Barker shortly. "I don't know whether Rod Grant can make a pitcher of himself or not, but I was thinking that Hooker might pan out fairly well if only Phil would take the same interest and pains with him as he's taking with Rod."

"Perhaps so," said the captain of the nine; "but I have my doubts. Roy is too egotistical to listen to advice and coaching, and he entertains the mistaken idea that curves and speed are all a pitcher needs. He hasn't any control."

"But he might acquire it."

"He might, if he only had the patience to try for it and work hard, but you know he's no worker."

They had reached the gymnasium, and the discussion was dropped as they entered and joined the boys in the dressing room, who were hurriedly getting into their baseball togs. Hooker was there with the others, for he had a suit of his own, which was one of the best of the discarded

uniforms given up at the opening of the previous season when the team had purchased new suits. There was a great deal of joshing and laughter, in which Roy took no part; for he was a fellow who found little amusement in the usual babble and jests of his schoolmates, and nothing aroused his resentment quicker than to be made the butt of a harmless joke. He had once choked Cooper purple in the face in retaliation for a jest put upon him by the audacious, rattle-brained little chap; but later Chipper had accepted Roy's apologies and protestations of regret, practically forgetting the unpleasant incident, which, however, Roy never did.

"Ah-ha!" cried Sile Crane, bringing forth and flourishing a long, burnt, battered bat. "Here's Old Buster, the sack cleaner. Haowdy do, my friend? I'm sartainly glad to shake ye again."

"Up to date," said Cooper, tying his shoes, "I've never seen you do any great shakes with Old Buster."

"Oh, ain't ye?" snapped Sile resentfully. "Mebbe yeou've forgot that three-sacker I got with this club in the Clearport game."

"Um-mum," mumbled Chipper. "Now you mention it, I do have a faint recollection of that marvelous accident. You were trying to dodge the ball, weren't you, Sile? You just shut your blinkers and ducked, and Pitkins' inshoot carromed off the bat over into right field and got lost in the grass. If we all hadn't yelled for you to run, you'd be standing there now, wondering what had happened."

"Yeou're another," flung back Crane. "I made a clean three-sacker, and yeou know it."

"Well, anyhow, you got anchored on third and failed to come home when I bunted on a signal for the squeeze. The Clearporters had barrels of fun with you over that. I remember Barney Carney asking you if you'd brought your bed."

"Oh, rats!" rasped Crane, striding toward the open gym door and carrying his pet bat. "Some parts of your memory ought to be amputated."

"What a cutting thing to say!" grinned Cooper, rising to follow.

The field, surrounded by a high board fence, was located near the gymnasium, and in a few minutes all the boys were on it and ready for

business. Announcing that they would begin with a little plain fielding practice, Eliot assigned them to their positions.

"Do you care to go into right, Roy?" he asked, turning to Hooker as the last one.

"Not I," was the instant answer. "That's not my position. I'm no outfielder. Right field, indeed!"

"Oh, very well," said Roger. "Tuttle, go ahead out."

"Sure," said Chub agreeably, waddling promptly away to fill the position assigned him.

"Springer will bat to the outfield and Grant to the in," directed the captain. "After we warm up a little, we'll try some regular batting and base running, using the old system of signals."

Hooker, who had a ball of his own, turned away, and found Fred Sage, whose sole interest in the line of sports lay in football, and who, therefore, had taken no part in baseball after making a decided failure on one occasion when, the team being short, he had allowed himself to be coaxed into a uniform.

"There's an extra mitt on the bench, Fred,"

said Roy. "If you'll catch me, I'll work a few kinks out of my arm."

"Can't you find somebody else?" asked Sage reluctantly. "I came out to look on."

"Oh, come ahead," urged Hooker. "Get your blood to circulating. Who would ever think you were the quarter back of the great Oakdale eleven? Here's the mitt, take it."

"Come over by the fence," requested Fred. "I'll let that do most of the backstopping."

Over by the fence they went, and Hooker began limbering up, calling the curves he would use before throwing them. He had them all; but, as usual, he was wild as a hawk, and Sage would have been forced to do some tall jumping and reaching had he attempted to catch the ball more than half the time.

"You've got some great benders, Roy, if you could ever put them over," commented Fred.

"I can put them over when I want to," was the retort. "It's only a chump pitcher who keeps the ball over the pan all the time."

Satisfied after a time, he decided to stop, not a little to the relief and satisfaction of Sage.

Eliot was just announcing that the team would begin regular batting and base-running practice, and immediately Roy asked the privilege of pitching.

"All right," agreed Roger, "but remember this is to be batting practice, and not a work-out for pitchers. Start it off, Springer, and run out your hit. You'll follow him, Grant. Come in from the field, Stone and Tuttle. Let some of the youngsters chase the balls out there. We've got to have four batters working."

Chub and Ben came trotting in as Springer took his place at the plate. The captain requested two younger boys to back him up and return the balls he chose to let pass, and then Hooker toed the slab, resolved to show these fellows what he could do. He put all his speed into the first ball pitched, a sharp shoot, which caught Springer on the hip, in spite of Phil's effort to dodge it.

"Say, what are you tut-trying to do?" spluttered the batter, as he hobbled in a circle around the plate.

"That one slipped," said Hooker. "I got more of a twist on it than I intended."

Phil picked up the bat, which he had dropped, and resumed his position. Three times Roy pitched wildly, and then when he finally got the ball over, Springer met it for a clean single, and trotted to first.

"Now play the game, fellows," called Eliot, from behind the pan.

Hooker's small eyes glittered as Rodney Grant stepped to the plate. Like a flash he pitched, again using an in-shoot.

Grant stepped back, held his bat loosely and bunted. As bat and ball met, the Texan's fingers seemed to release the club, and it fell to the ground almost as soon as the ball. Like a jack-rabbit he was off, shooting down the line toward first, while Springer, who had known by the signal just what was coming, romped easily to second.

Hooker had not intended for Grant to bunt that ball, having tried to send it high and close; and now in his haste to secure the sphere, he stumbled over it, and ere he could recover and

throw, the speedy boy from the Lone Star State was so near first that Eliot shouted, "Hold it!"

His face flushed, his under jaw outshot a bit further than usual, Roy returned to the box, ignoring Chipper Cooper, who was cackling with apparent great delight.

Tuttle waddled toward the pan, bat in hand.

"I'll strike him out easy enough," thought Roy.

Instead of that, he pitched four wide ones, all of which were declared balls by Sage, who had been requested to umpire; and Chub jogged to first, complaining that Hooker had been afraid to let him hit.

Then came Stone, who let a wide one pass, but reached a bit for the next, caught it about six inches from the end of his bat, and laced it fairly over the centerfield fence, a feat rarely performed on those grounds.

"My arm isn't in shape yet," said Hooker, trying to remain deaf to the laughter of the boys, as the runners trotted over the sacks and came home. "I won't pitch any more to-day, Eliot."

CHAPTER III.

TWO OF A KIND.

Sitting alone on the bleachers, Roy Hooker sourly watched the continuation of practice. He saw Springer take a turn at pitching, to be followed finally by Rodney Grant, who laughingly warned the boys that he intended to strike them all out.

Rodney Grant was a somewhat peculiar character, who, coming unannounced to Oakdale, had at first been greatly misunderstood by the boys there, not a few of whom had fancied him an impostor and a fake Texan, mainly because of his quiet manners and conventional appearance; for these unsophisticated New England lads had been led, through the reading of a certain brand of Western literature, to believe that all Texans, and especially those who dwelt upon ranches, must be of the "wild and woolly" variety. Perceiving this at last, Rod had proceeded to amuse

himself not a little by assuming a false air of bravado, and spinning some highly preposterous yarns of his hair-lifting adventures upon the plains; a course which, however, adopted too late to be effective, simply confirmed the doubters—who could not realize that they were being joshed—in their belief that the fellow was an out-and-out fraud.

Adding to Grant's unpopularity, and the growing disdain in which he was held, although plainly a strong, healthy, athletic chap, he not only refused to come out for football, but displayed an aversion for violent physical contention of any sort, especially fighting; which caused him to be branded as a coward. But the time came when, unable longer to endure the insults heaped upon him, the restraint of the young Texan snapped like a bowstring, and the boys of Oakdale found that a sleeping lion had suddenly awakened. Then it came to be known that Grant had inherited a most unfortunate family failing, a terrible temper, which, when uncontrolled, was liable to lead him into extreme acts of violence; and it was this temper he feared, instead of the

fellows he had shunned whenever they sought to provoke him. Even now, although baseball was a gentle game in comparison with football, he was not absolutely sure he could always deport himself as a gentleman and a sportsman while playing it.

When the boys of the academy and the citizens of the town had joined in praise of Grant's courageous efforts in the work of rescuing Lela Barker from drowning, Hooker, who never had words of eulogy for anyone save himself, remained silent. Not that he had not come, like others, suddenly to regard the young Texan with respect; but for one of his envious nature respect does not always mean liking, no throb of which was awakened in his bosom. Indeed, he secretly disliked Rodney Grant more than ever, and, now that Springer had taken Grant in hand to make a pitcher of him, Roy's spleen was embittering his very soul.

Elbows on his knees, projecting chin on his clenched fists, he sullenly watched Rod pitch for the first time to batters. Several times he made in his throat a faint sound like a muttered growl

of satisfaction, as he saw those batters hitting the ball to all parts of the field, and finally he triumphantly whispered:

"Well, I don't see that he's doing anything. They're pounding him all over the lot."

But, at the suggestion of Eliot, Rodney Grant was simply putting the ball over, now and then using speed, of which he apparently had enough, and occasionally mixing in a curve. Behind the pan Eliot would hold up his big mitt first on one corner then the other, now high, now low, and almost invariably the ball came whistling straight into the pocket of that mitt, which caused Roger to nod his head and brought to his face a faint touch of that rare smile seldom seen there.

"Good control, Rod, old man," he praised. "That's one of the most essential qualities a pitcher can have."

"Bah!" muttered the envious lad on the bleachers. "What's that amount to, if a fellow hasn't the curves at his command?"

Presently, with Barker stepping out to hit, Eliot called Grant, met him ten feet in front of the plate, and they exchanged a few words in low

tones, after which Roger returned to his position and gave the regular finger signals that he would use in a game.

Barker slashed at a high one close across his shoulders and missed. He let two wide ones pass, and fouled when a bender cut a corner.

"Two strikes!" cried Sage, who was still umpiring. "Look out or he'll strike you out, Berlin."

With a faint smile, the batter shrugged his shoulders, and then he did his best to meet the next pitched ball, which seemed to be the kind he especially relished. To his surprise, he missed it widely, for the ball took a sharp drop at the proper moment to deceive him.

"You're out," laughed Sage. "He did get you."

"He did for a fact," agreed Berlin. "That was a dandy drop, Grant. I wasn't looking for it."

Rodney put the next one straight over, and Berlin hit to Cooper at short.

Jack Nelson followed, and he was likewise surprised to be struck out, Grant using his drop twice in the performance.

"Hi there, you!" shouted Nelson. "What did you put on the old ball, anyhow? Pitch? Well, I wouldn't be surprised if you could, some."

"You bet he will," called Phil Springer delightedly. "I'll have him delivering the goods before the season is half over."

"Bah!" again muttered Hooker. "You're a fool, Springer."

Later he saw Eliot and Barker talking together not far from the bench, and near them stood Herbert Rackliff, a city boy who had entered Oakdale Academy at the opening of the spring term.

Rackliff was a chap whose clothes were the envy of almost every lad in town, being tailor-made, of the latest cut and the finest fabric. His ties and his socks, a generous portion of the latter displayed by the up-rolled bottoms of his trousers, were always of a vivid hue and usually of silk. His highly-polished russet shoes were scarcely browner than the tips of two fingers of his right hand, which outside of school hours were constantly dallying with a cigarette. He had rings and scarf pins, and a gold watch with a hand-

some seal fob. His face was pale and a trifle hollow-cheeked, his chest flat, and his muscles, lacking exercise, sadly undeveloped. For Rackliff took no part in outdoor sports of any sort, protesting that too much exertion gave him palpitation of the heart.

Hooker was still sitting hunched on the bleachers, when Rackliff, having lighted a fresh cigarette, came sauntering languidly toward him.

"Hello, Roy, old sport," saluted the city youth. "You look lonesome."

"I'm not," retorted Hooker shortly.

"Well, you're not practicing, and you must be tired of watching the animals perform. I came over to kill a little time, but it's grown monotonous for me, and I'm going to beat it."

"I think I'll get out myself," said Hooker, descending from the bleachers.

Rackliff accompanied him to the gymnasium, where Roy hastened to strip off his baseball togs and get into his regular clothes.

"What made you quit pitching so soon?" questioned the city lad, lingering near. "You

don't mind being hit a little in batting practice, do you?"

"That wasn't it," fibbed Hooker. "Didn't you hear those chumps cackle with glee? That's what made me sore. Then what's the use for me to try to pitch if Eliot isn't going to give me any sort of a show?"

"No use at all," said Rackliff cheerfully. "I've noticed that on all these athletic teams there's more or less partiality shown."

"That's it," cried Roy savagely. "It's partiality. Eliot doesn't like me, and he isn't going to let me do any pitching. Wants to bury me out in right garden, the rottenest position on the team. A fellow never has much of any chance out there."

"Oh, probably he knew you wouldn't accept the position, anyhow," said Herbert. "He had to make a bluff at giving you something."

"I'll show him he can't impose on me."

"They're going to boost this individual from the alfalfa regions, it seems. He's surely become the real warm baby around here. I heard Barker confidentially admitting to your captain——"

"Not *my* captain," objected Roy.

"I heard Barker confidentially admitting to Eliot," pursued Rackliff serenely, "that he was greatly surprised in the showing Grant had made and was not at all sure but the fellow would eventually become a better pitcher than Springer."

"Say, that would make Springer feel good, the blooming chump!" cried Roy, rising to his feet. "He's coaching Grant, so the cowboy can act as second pitcher and help him out; but, if he realized he might be training a fellow to push him out of his place as the star twirler of the team, I guess he'd quit in a hurry."

"Very likely he might," nodded Herbert. "No chap with real sense is going to be dunce enough to teach some one to rise above him."

"That will make trouble between them yet, see if it doesn't," prophesied Hooker in sudden satisfaction. "They're mighty thick now, but there'll be an end to that if Phil Springer ever realizes what may happen."

"Somebody might carelessly drop a hint to him," smiled Rackliff.

Suddenly Roy's small, keen eyes were fixed inquiringly on his companion.

"I don't see why you take so much interest," he wondered. "You must have a reason."

Herbert shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps so," he admitted. "Are you ready? Let's get a move on before the bunch comes over."

They left the gymnasium, and walked down the street together. Hooker had conceived a sudden, singular interest in Rackliff.

"I always wondered how you happened to come to school here at Oakdale," he confessed.

"Have a cigarette," invited Herbert, extending an open, gold-mounted morocco case.

"Don't like 'em, thank you," declined Roy.

The other boy lighted a fresh one from the stub of the last.

"So you've been speculating as to the cause of my choosing this serene, rural seat of knowledge, have you? Well, I'll own up that it wasn't my choice. I'm not very eager about burying myself alive, and if ever there was a cemetery, it's the town of Oakdale. My pater was the guilty party."

"Oh, your father sent you here?"

"Correct. I would have chosen Wyndham, but Newbert's old man sent him down there, and my governor thought we should be kept apart in future."

"Newbert? Who's Newbert?"

"You'll hear from him later, I fancy. *He's* a chap who can really pitch baseball. He's my partner in crime."

"Your what?"

"My chum. We hit it off together pretty well for the last year or so; for Dade—that's his name—is a corker. Never mind the details, and the facts concerning the precise nature of our little difficulty wouldn't interest you; but we got into a high old scrape, and were both expelled from school. When I found Dade's old man was going to send him to Wyndham, I put it up to my sire to let me go there also, but he got wise and chose this corner of the map for mine. You know, he came from here originally."

"I didn't know it."

"Yes, moved out of this tomb nearly thirty years ago. But he knew what it was like, and

I presume he fancied I'd be good and safe down here, where there's absolutely nothing doing. Hence, here I am. Pity my woes."

"Oh, well, perhaps you might stir up something around here, if you tried hard enough," said Hooker. "If you took an interest in baseball——"

"What good would that do me, with your dearly-beloved friend, Roger Eliot, choosing his favorites for the team? Besides, I don't think I'd care to play if I could with a bunch that had a cow-puncher for a slab artist."

"You've got a grudge against Grant. You don't like him."

"Great discernment," laughed Rackliff, with a hollow cough that sent little puffs of smoke belching from his lips. "Confidentially, I'll own up that I'm not stuck on him."

"I'm with you. I don't go around blowing about it, but I haven't any use for that specimen from the cow country."

"He seems to be very popular, especially with the girls," murmured Rackliff. "Now there's only one girl in this town that strikes me as some-

thing outside the milkmaid class. Lela Barker is *it*—in italics. Still, I'm going to admit that I don't think her taste and discernment is all it should be. Of course, she's naturally grateful to Grant for that bath he took on her account, but that's no reason why she should hand me the frosty."

"Oh, I begin to see," muttered Hooker, grinning a bit for the first time. "Jealous."

"Don't make me laugh; I might crack my face. Jealous of a cattle puncher! Excuse me! All the same, it's a bit provoking to see people slobbering over him, especially the girls, the same as if he's made of the stuff found in heroes of fiction."

"I think," said Hooker, "there's a bond of sympathy between us."

CHAPTER IV.

LEN ROBERTS OF BARVILLE.

In front of the post office stood a boy with a faded pea-green cap, hung rakishly over one ear. He had a crooked nose, which looked as if some one had given it a violent twist to one side, and, perceiving Hooker approaching, he smiled a crooked smile, that gave his features the odd appearance of struggling desperately to pull his proboscis back into place.

"Hello!" muttered Roy in surprise. "As I live, there's Len Roberts, of Barville! What's he doing here?"

"Hi, there, Hooky!" called Roberts from the right-hand corner of his mouth. "How they coming? Ain't seen you since the last time. Any fun 'round this metropolitan burg?"

"Howdy, Len," answered Roy. "What brought you over here, anyhow?"

"The old man's nag and buggy. He came over

to buy a horse from Abe Tuttle, and I asked him to fetch me along to lead or ride the critter back. He'n Tuttle are dickering now. Thought perhaps I might see somebody I knew if I hung 'round here."

"My friend, Herbert Rackliff, from Boston," said Hooker, introducing his companion. "That hub of the universe and seat of knowledge became too slow for him, so he migrated down here to Oakdale to acquire learning at our academic institution."

"Glad to meet you," said Roberts, still speaking out of one side of his mouth, in a way that somehow gave the impression that he did not wish the other side of his face to know what he was saying. "From Boston—and come to attend school in Oakdale. Jingoes!"

Rackliff smiled wryly, as his hand was given a squeeze by the wearer of the green cap. "Don't wonder you're surprised," he murmured. "Awful, isn't it? But then, I'm not to blame. Just been explaining to Roy, that my governor is responsible for the fearful crime."

"Sent you down here, did he? Well, what did

you do to lead him to perpetrate such an outrage?"

"Got caught having a little fun, that's all. Expelled."

"Some fathers never can seem to understand that boys must have amusement. How's baseball coming, Hooky?"

"Oh, after the same old style," growled Hooker. "Roger Eliot is running the whole shooting match."

"He seems to be the high mogul in this town," chuckled Roberts.

"He makes me sick!" snapped Roy. "I don't care whether I play baseball or not, but I'd like to see Oakdale have a captain who'd give every fellow a square and fair show."

"Hasn't Eliot given you a square deal?"

"Not by a long shot. The bunch is practicing on the field now. He wanted to pack me away into right garden, but I never was built to be a nonentity in the outfield."

"I thought likely perhaps you'd do part of the pitching this year. Seems to me they must need you."

"Oh, they'll need somebody, all right; but Springer's trying to coach up our cattle puncher, Grant, to do part of the twirling. You don't know Grant. He's a new man; came in last fall. He's from Texas."

"Can he pitch?"

"Pitch! Just about as much as an old woman."

"Well, I don't mind telling you that Oakdale is certainly going to need a good man on the slab when she runs up against Barville this year. Needn't think you'll have the same sort of a snap you had last season. Lucky for you Lee Sanger hadn't developed when you played us. Gee! but he did come toward the end of the season. Look how he held Wyndham down; and he'd won that game, too, with proper support. He'll be better this year."

"I hope Barville beats the everlasting stuffing out of Oakdale."

"Do you really?" chuckled Roberts. "How's your friend feel about it? Does he play?"

"Nit," said Rackliff. "Draw poker is about the only kind of a game I ever take a hand in."

"Oh, Herbert knows they've given me a rotten

deal," said Hooker quickly. "He's got his opinion about it. Honestly and truly, we'd both like to see Barville win."

"If that is the case," whispered Roberts, with a secretively friendly and confidential air, "you're just about dead sure to have your desire gratified. We'll have the finest high school battery ever seen in these parts. Got a new catcher, you know."

"No. I didn't know."

"Yep. He's a corker. Knows the game from A to Z, and he's coaching Sanger. You should see them work together. By the way, he comes from a town near Boston. Part of the city, isn't it—Roxbury? He knows more baseball than any fellow in these parts."

"What's his name?" asked Rackliff, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Copley."

"What?" exclaimed Herbert, nearly dropping his cigarette. "Not Newt Copley?"

"That's him."

"Great scott! Say, he *is* a catcher. He's the trickiest man who ever went behind a bat. I

know, for I've seen him play. He knows me, too. Say, isn't it odd that I should have a chum pitching for Wyndham this year and an acquaintance catching for Barville?"

The face of Len Roberts wore a look of satisfaction.

"Of course, we haven't seen Cop in a real game yet, but he brought his credentials with him, and they were sufficient to satisfy everybody that he was the real thing. Glad to meet somebody who knows about him. With Sanger handing 'em up, and Cop doing the receiving, you can bet Barville is going to take a fall out of Oakdale."

"I'd like to bet on it," said Herbert, with a touch of eagerness; "but I don't suppose I could find anybody down around here with sporting blood enough to risk any real money on the game. Say, do me a favor; tell Newt Copley that Herbert Rackliff is here in this town. He'll remember the fellow they called 'the plunger,' and 'the dead-game sport.' Even if I don't play baseball, I've sometimes made a few easy dollars betting on the games."

"And you'd bet against Oakdale?"

"Sure thing, if I felt certain she would lose."

"I'm afraid," grinned Roberts, "that neither you nor Hooker is very loyal to his school."

"Loyal!" snarled Roy. "Why should we be?"

"When it comes to wagering money," observed Rackliff wisely, "the fellow who bets on sympathy or loyalty is a chump. I always back my judgment and try to use some common sense about it. I hope you don't think for a fleeting moment that I contemplate finishing my preparatory school education in this stagnant hole. Not for little Herbert. I'd get paresis here in less than a year. I'm pretty sure the governor simply chucked me down here for a term, as sort of a warning. I'll go back for good when the term's over."

"Well, now if you fellows really want to see Oakdale surprised, and enjoy the pleasure of witnessing Barville hand 'em a good trimming, perhaps you won't say anything about our new catcher."

"Not a word," promised Hooker.

"Not a whisper," assured Rackliff. "And per-

haps I'll catch a sucker or two if I fish around for them. Really, the prospect is inviting, for it seems to promise a break in the deadly monotony."

"Here come some of the fellows now," said Hooker, as two or three boys were seen coming down Lake Street. "Practice is over. Let's sift along, Rack. I don't care to see them. So long, Len. Good luck to you."

"So long, fellows," said the boy from Barville, as they turned up Main Street. "You'll have a chance to be happy Saturday. Bet all you can on it, Rackliff, old fel."

CHAPTER V.

HOOKER'S MOTORCYCLE.

Thus began the friendship between Roy Hooker and Herbert Rackliff. Henceforth they were seen together a great deal. They came out to watch the nine practice, but Hooker no longer wore his baseball suit, and he sat on the bleachers with Herbert, the two talking together in guarded tones. No one paid much attention to them, for most of the boys held very decided opinions, which were far from favorable, of a chap who would show the disposition Hooker had so plainly betrayed; and Rackliff had never revealed an inclination to seek popularity among his schoolmates.

Roy was the owner of a second-hand motorcycle, which his father had given him at Christmas time, a present that had filled him with keen delight and intense satisfaction, in the knowledge that it would cause him to be envied by less for-

tunate lads. It was necessary, however, to tinker a great deal over the machine to keep it in running order, and the joshing flung at him by the Oakdale lads whenever he had a breakdown had been anything but balm to his irritable nature.

"Confound the thing!" he cried, after fussing with it a long time one night, while Rackliff, his creased trousers carefully pulled up to prevent bagging at the knees, sat on a box near by, in the open door of the carriage house, smoking cigarettes. "I don't believe it's any good. The old man got soaked."

"It seems harder work to keep the thing going than to pump an ordinary bike," said Herbert, "and that's too strenuous for me—though I learned to ride one once."

"Oh, regular bicycles are back numbers now. I could have a ripping lot of fun if I could make this machine go. Never saw anything so contrary. Sometimes it starts off and behaves fine for a little while, and I think it's all right. Just when I get to thinking that, it kicks up and leaves me a mile or two away from home, and I have to push or pedal it back. That's what makes me

sore. If I try to sneak in by some back way somebody is sure to see me and give me the ha-ha."

"Like automobiles," observed Herbert, after letting a little smoke drift through his nose, "they're all right when they go, and a perfect nuisance when they don't. Now look at yourself, Roy, old fellow. Your hands are covered with grease, and you've got a black streak across your nose, and you're all fretted up."

"Drat the old thing!" snarled Hooker, giving the rear tire a kick. "It's just simply contrary, that's all. There's only one person in town who knows anything about gas engines, and he's Urian Eliot's chauffeur. I suppose I could get him to tinker this contraption up if I only was chummy with Roger."

"Anyway," said Herbert, "I should think it would shake one up fearfully riding over these rough country roads. *We* have some roads around Boston."

"Oh, a fellow can pick his way along pretty well after our roads get settled. Of course, they're no macadamized boulevards. It's lots of

sport, and one can get around almost anywhere he wants to go. As long as I'm not going to be on the baseball team, I might use it to run over to Barville or Wyndham or Clearport to see the games."

"So you're going to chase the games up, are you?" laughed Rackliff. "I thought perhaps you'd be so sore you'd keep away from them."

"What, and lose the chance of seeing Oakdale beaten? Why, I wouldn't miss that first game with Barville for anything."

"But you don't have to go out of this town to see that game. Give it to me straight, Roy, is that fellow Sanger really much of a pitcher? Of course, I know Roberts would blow about him, but what do you think?"

"He was green the first of last season, and with a poor catcher to hold him he didn't show up very strong; but it's a fact that Wyndham, the fastest team in these parts, only got three clean hits off him the last game he pitched."

"Well, he'll have a catcher that can hold him this year," declared the city lad. "Newt Copley is a bird. He can throw to bases, too; it's rank

suicide for runners to try to steal on him. Then you should see him work a batter. Gets right under the man's club and talks to him in a low tone, telling him how rotten he is and all that, until he has the fellow swinging like a gate at every old thing that comes over. And the way he can touch a bat with his mitt and deflect it on the third strike without being detected by the umpire is wonderful. He's great for kicking up a rumpus in a game; but he enjoys it, for he'd rather fight than eat."

"He hadn't better try anything like that on Rod Grant."

"Oh, I don't know," murmured Rackliff. "Copley's a scrapper, and he can handle his dukes. He has science, and it's my opinion he'd eat your cowboy alive."

Hooker shook his head. "You never saw Grant when his blood was up. I have, and he's a perfect fury. They say his old man was a great fighter, and that he's been all shot and cut to pieces. *I* wouldn't buck up against the Texan for anything."

With which confession Hooker resumed his

tinkering on the motorcycle. After a while, with the switch on, he bestrode the thing and started to pump it down the slight incline toward the street.

Suddenly, to Roy's delight, the motor began to fire, and, with a shout of satisfaction, he turned up the street and disappeared from view.

In something like five minutes Rackliff, smoking his tenth cigarette since seating himself on the box, heard the repeated explosions of the motorcycle, and Roy, his face beaming with satisfaction, reappeared, came triumphantly up the rise and leaped off.

"She goes like a bird," he cried.

"What did you do to it?" asked Herbert.

"I wish I knew. I just tinkered with the wires a bit. That was the last thing I did, but I'd been at everything else I could think of, so I don't know what it was that sent her off. If she'll only keep going, I don't care, either. Never knew the thing to run better. Say, Herbert, it's fine. Don't you want to try it?"

"Oh, I don't believe I do. I'd break my neck."

"Paugh! 'Tain't no trick at all. I can show

you how to start her and stop her, and, if you can ride an ordinary bicycle, you'll find it a cinch to ride this. Come on. Afraid?"

"Oh, no," said Rackliff, rising and snapping aside the butt of his cigarette, "but I should hate to get very far away and have it stop on me."

"You don't have to go very far; just try her through Middle Street, up Main, back along High, and down Willow, and here you are."

Herbert looked dubious, but finally, after his companion had chaffed him a while, he agreed to make the venture. Roy gave full and complete directions about the manipulation of the motorcycle, and Rackliff, a trifle pale, finally mounted it and started down the incline.

"Turn the handles from you," shouted Roy. "Give her a little gas. There she goes. Now you're off."

"Now I'm *on*," muttered Herbert, as the engine began popping away beneath him; "but I may be *off* directly."

Turning into the street, he barely escaped the gutter at the far side, and away he went, watched by Hooker, who had run out to the sidewalk.

Remembering instructions, and following them faithfully, Rackliff speeded up the engine or slowed it down, as he desired, and soon his confidence rose. One of the street crossings gave him a bump that nearly threw him off, but he was prepared for the next, and took it easily. In a brief time he had covered the course laid out for him by his friend, and found himself back at Hooker's home, where he promptly shut off the gas, switched the spark, and, a little flushed, swung himself to the ground ere the machine fully stopped.

"Say, it is rather nifty," he beamed. "It's got ordinary biking beaten to death. Don't know but I'd like to have one of the things myself. Never supposed I could ride one, but it isn't such a trick, after all."

"Of course, it isn't," agreed Hooker, "and I suppose after I get onto the knack of it I won't have any trouble keeping her running."

"If you don't mind, I think I'll practice on it a little now and then. Perhaps I might induce the governor to give me one, by way of atone-

ment for his heartless treatment in sending me down here to school."

"Why, yes, you can practice up on mine," consented Roy slowly, a sudden troubled look coming to his face; "but I suppose if you got one it would be new and up to date, and make me feel ashamed of mine."

"Oh, come off," smiled Herbert soothingly. "If I had one we could pike around to the baseball games together, and we might be able to pick up a little easy money by betting on them—if we ever found anybody who had the nerve to bet with us. I kept myself supplied with pocket money in that fashion last year. Occasionally made a little something playing poker, but the games were always so small a fellow couldn't do much at them."

"Didn't you ever lose?"

"Well, not very often. I didn't bet to lose."

"I know, but how could you be sure of winning?"

Rackliff winked languidly and wisely. "As I told that chap from Barville, the fellow who bets on sympathy or loyalty is a chump. I always

investigate matters pretty thoroughly, and then pick the side I believe has every prospect of winning. Sometimes it's possible to help one team or another along on the quiet. I'd like to know what Newt Copley thinks of the Barville nine. I'd depend on his judgment. I've got a tenner I'd like to set to work to double itself."

"You always have plenty of money," said Roy enviously. "I never had ten whole dollars at one time in my life."

"My poor, poverty-stricken comrade!" murmured Herbert, preparing to light a fresh cigarette. "I sympathize with you. Follow my lead, and you'll wear diamonds."

CHAPTER VI.

A DEAD SURE THING.

Thereafter Rackliff took great interest in Hooker's motorcycle—more interest than the languid, indifferent fellow had seemed to show over anything else except his cigarettes. Even one rather severe fall from the machine, which sadly soiled his elegant and immaculate clothes, did not deter him from continuing to practice upon it whenever it was not being used by its owner and he could find the opportunity. To the satisfaction of both lads, the machine behaved very well indeed, and Roy decided that, without knowing how he did it, he had fortunately succeeded in curing its "balkiness."

It was Roy, taking an early morning spin on the machine, who saw Phil Springer wearing the big catching mitt and coaching Rodney Grant to pitch in Springer's dooryard.

"You poor lobster! muttered Hooker contemptuously, as he chugged past. "If Grant really should pan out to be the better man, you'd feel like kicking yourself. I'd like to tell you what I think of you."

That night after supper, as usual, Rackliff strolled over to Hooker's home, but he strolled with steps somewhat quickened by the prospect of taking a turn on his friend's motorcycle.

At first Roy was not to be found, and his mother said she did not know where he had gone. The motorcycle was standing in the carriage house, causing Rackliff to wonder a little.

"Queer," muttered Herbert, rubbing his chin with his cigarette-stained fingers. "When the old lady said he wasn't around I thought sure he must be off with this machine."

To his ears came the sound of a dull thump, repeated at quite regular intervals. At first he thought it must be the horse stamping in the near-by stable, but the regular repetition of that thumping sound convinced him that such could not be the case and led him to investigate. Within the stable he was surprised to hear the

sound coming like a blow upon the back of the building, round which he finally sauntered.

There was Hooker, coat and cap off, sleeves rolled up, face flushed a little, throwing a base-ball at the rear wall of the building, recovering it when it rebounded, taking his place at a fixed distance, and throwing again.

Unperceived, so intent was Hooker, Herbert stood and watched for several minutes. Finally he spoke up interrogatingly:

"What are you trying to do, anyhow, old man? What in the name of mystery do you mean by sneaking out here and trying to wallop your arm off all by your lonesome?"

At the sound of the city boy's voice Roy had given a start and turned, ball in hand. He frowned a bit, then followed it with a rather shame-faced grin, as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Just amusing myself a little," he answered.

"Queer sort of amusement. Might satisfy a kid who couldn't find anything else to do. I thought likely you'd be using your motorcycle;

and, everything considered, I didn't suppose you'd care a rap about fingering a baseball."

"If you could catch me," returned Roy, "I'd have you put on my glove and see if I couldn't get 'em over a piece of plank the size of the home plate; but you can't catch, and so I'm trying to see how often I can hit that white shingle yonder. I actually hit it twice in succession a few minutes ago."

"Huh!" grunted Herbert. "What's the good of that?"

"I'm trying to get control, you know. They say that's what I lack. Even Eliot has acknowledged that I might pitch some if I wasn't so wild."

Herbert burst into soft, half-mocking laughter. "'Hope springs eternal in the human breast'," he quoted. "Nevertheless, good, plain, common sense should teach you that you're wasting your time. You're not wanted as a pitcher, and so you won't get a chance to do any twirling."

"You never can tell what may happen," returned Roy. "I never thought Springer was so much, and I haven't any great confidence in

Grant. What if they should both get theirs? Eliot might be forced to give me a show, and if that happens I'll deliver the goods——"

Rackliff snapped his yellow fingers. "You've got the baseball bug bad," he said. "It's a disease. I suppose it has to have its run with the fellows who become infected. All right, waste your time; but while you're doing it, if you don't mind, I'd like to take a spin on your motorcycle. There *is* some fun in that, I own up."

"Well, don't be gone long," said Roy. "I guess I'll get enough of this in ten or fifteen minutes more, and I want to ride some myself to-night."

Trundling out the machine, Rackliff heard the ball thudding again against the back of the stable.

Friday afternoon Herbert did not appear at school. Hooker looked for him in vain and wondered why he had remained away. Alone he watched the boys practice a while when school was over, Grant doing his full share of pitching to the batters. Despite prejudice and envy, Roy could see that Springer's pupil was gaining confi-

dence and beginning to carry himself with the air of a real pitcher.

"But he hasn't had any experience," muttered the jealous and unfortunate lad. "Wait till he gets into a game and they begin to bump him. That temper of his will make him lose his head." Which was evidence enough that Roy little understood Rodney Grant, who invariably became all the more resolute and determined by opposition, and stood in no danger of giving way to his fiery temper, except when met by buffets of physical force in the form of personal violence.

Reaching home, Hooker went out behind the stable and plugged away at the white shingle until supper time, fancying he was gaining some skill in accuracy, although it seemed almost impossible to score a hit or come near it when he used a curve.

Supper over, he looked for Rackliff to appear. "He'll be around pretty soon, so I'll just take a short ride and come back."

In the carriage house he stopped, his undershot jaw drooping; for the motorcycle was missing from the stand on which it was always kept,

when not in use. "What the dickens——" he cried, and stopped short.

After looking all around to make sure the machine was not there, he rushed into the house and questioned his mother.

"It *must* be there, Roy," she said. "I'm sure nobody has touched it. I would have heard them."

"But it isn't there," he shouted. "Somebody has stolen it." Then he caught his breath, struck by a sudden thought. "Has Herbert Rackliff been around here to-day?" he asked.

"I haven't seen him, but I hope you don't think your friend would take your motorcycle without——"

He did not wait to hear any more. Rushing out of the house, he had reached the sidewalk when, to his unspeakable relief, round the corner from Willow Street came Rackliff, somewhat dust-covered and perspiring, trundling the motorcycle. Hooker glared at him.

"What do you mean by taking my machine without asking?" he rasped. "Where have you been with it?"

"My dear old pal," said Herbert soothingly,

"do give me time to get my breath, and then I'll seek to conciliate you with a full explanation. I've had to push this confounded thing for at least five miles, and I'm pretty near pegged out. It stopped on me on my way home."

"Five miles?" snapped Roy, taking the machine from the limp and weary city boy. "Where in blazes have you been with it?"

But not until he had seated himself to rest in the carriage house, and lighted a cigarette, did Rackliff offer any further explanation. Finally, with a little cough and a tired sigh, he smiled on the still frowning and outraged owner of the machine.

"You didn't see me around school this afternoon, did you?" he asked.

"No. I wondered where you were."

"I was out laying my pipes."

"Doing what?"

"Making sure that you and I could form a little pool and seek a few wagers on the game to-morrow, with the dead certainty of winning. I've been over to Barville to see Newt Copley."

"Oh!" muttered Hooker. "And you put my machine on the blink!"

"It simply quit on me, that's all. I didn't do a thing to it—on my word, I didn't. There's nothing broken, old man. I'm certain you'll be able to tinker it up again all right. You can bet your life I'd never made that trip if I'd dreamed it would be necessary for me to push the old thing so far. Still, I'm mighty glad I went. Say, Roy, Copley is dead sure Barville will have more than an even show with Oakdale to-morrow, and you know what I think of his judgment. Now, if you've got any money, or can raise any, just bet it on Barville and make a killing."

"But I wouldn't want to be seen betting against my own school team."

"Ho! ho!" laughed Herbert derisively. "Then let me have your cash, and I'll place it for you. I haven't any scruples."

"But you may be mistaken. Even Copley may be, for he hasn't seen Oakdale play."

"He says Sanger is a wiz. Look here, Roy, do you know Eliot's finger signals to the pitcher?"

"Why, yes."

"Uses the old finger system, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"One finger held straight, a straight ball. Two fingers close together, an outcurve; spread apart, one on the inside corner. One finger crooked like a fish-hook, a drop."

"You've got 'em correct, but what's that got to do with——"

"Oh, I just wanted to know," chuckled Rackliff. "Get your loose change together and let me handle it. If I don't double it for you to-morrow I'll agree to stand any loss you may sustain. You won't be even taking a chance. What do you say?"

"Well, if you're as confident as that," answered Roy, "I'm certainly going to raise a little money somehow to bet on that game."

CHAPTER VII.

RACKLIFF FISHES FOR SUCKERS.

Saturday came, warm and balmy with spring-time odors. Roy Hooker, standing at the street corner near his home, seemed to be listening to a robin calling joyously from the topmost branches of the elm that rose above his head; but, truth to tell, the boy's ears were deaf to the notes of the bird, and his eyes were being turned alternately along Middle Street or down Willow. He was waiting for some one, and presently that person appeared, leisurely approaching, with now and then a thin wisp of smoke drifting over his shoulder. It was Rackliff, dressed with his usual care, but looking, if possible, a little paler and more languid than ever.

"I thought it was about time for you to show up," said Roy a trifle fretfully. "You said you'd be around by nine; it's twenty minutes after by the clock in the Methodist steeple."

"It is said," returned Herbert, "that the early bird catches the worm; and, as we're all worms of the earth, I don't believe in taking any chances with the bird. Didn't sleep very well last night. Fancy that jaunt to Barville was too much for me; though, to tell the truth, I'm a rotten poor sleeper anyhow. I wake up at the slightest noise in the night, and, having some nerves of my own, usually get a case of heart palpitation, which is deucedly unpleasant. Then perhaps I won't go to sleep again for two hours or more. I envy any fellow who snoozes like a log." He concluded with a short, hollow laugh.

"The trouble with you is," said Roy, "that you smoke too much."

"Tell it to Johnson," scoffed Herbert. "I've always been that way; smoking doesn't have anything to do with it. Besides, if it did I couldn't leave off. I've got the habit for fair."

"I wouldn't like to say that; I'd hate to own up to it."

"Oh, it's nothing. Cigarettes never killed any one yet, old women and moralizers to the contrary, notwithstanding. Well, chum, how are

you fixed? Did you make a raise so that you can bet a little cold cash on the great contest to-day? You said you thought you'd have some money this——"

"'Sh!" hissed Roy, glancing around apprehensively toward the house. "Don't talk about that here."

"Eh? Why not?"

"I don't want my folks to find out anything about it," whispered Hooker. "Come on, let's walk up the street."

At the corner above they turned into High Street, coming finally to the white Methodist church.

"Let's stroll around behind the church, where no one will see us," proposed Hooker.

"Like a pair of plotters on foul intentions bent," laughed Herbert. "To watch you manœuvre, one might get the fancy that you were involved in some desperate and terrible piece of work."

"Now, look here, Herb," said Roy, facing his companion behind the church, "you're situated differently from me, and you can't seem to under-

stand my position. You don't belong in Oakdale, and you don't care a rap what the fellows around here think of you or say about you."

"Not a rap," nodded Rackliff.

"That's just it. Now this is my home, and I've got to be careful about some things. I don't want to get everybody down on me."

"I haven't observed," said Rackliff unfeelingly, "that you're particularly popular with the fellows of this benighted burg."

"I'll make myself a blame sight more unpopular if they ever get onto it that I bet against my own school team. You can do it, for you say you don't expect to stay here more than one term, anyhow. Then if my folks should know, they'd raise the merry dickens."

"And that would break the monotony of a severely humdrum existence. I've had more than one stormy session with the head of my family. How much money did you scrape together?"

"I haven't counted it yet," answered Roy, thrusting his hand into his pocket and looking around, as if apprehensive that they were being

watched. "I say, Herb, are you really dead sure that Barville will win this afternoon?"

Rackliff sighed. "As sure as one can be of anything in this old world. Hook, you've got cold feet."

"Well, I wouldn't want to lose this money. I can't afford to lose it. I *can't* lose it."

"You won't, old chap—you won't. I'm getting you in on this out of pure friendliness, nothing else; and you must remember what I agreed to do yesterday—if you lose, I'll stand for the loss."

"That's generous; that's all right. Perhaps you can't get any bets, anyhow. The fellows around here aren't given to betting real money on baseball." Roy produced a closely folded little wad of bills and some loose change. "Here's all I have," he went on. "I'm going to let you take it and bet it on Barville, if you can." There was a two dollar bill, two ones, and eighty-five cents in change.

"Fifteen cents more would make an even five," said Herbert. "Can't you dig that much up?"

"This is all I have," repeated Hooker, "every last red cent. I'll have to pay admission to the

game, too, as long as I'm not on the nine. I must keep a quarter for that."

"And that leaves it forty cents shy of a fiver. Well, if necessary, I'll make that up. I'm going to risk ten of my own money."

"Risk it?" muttered Hooker, again troubled by qualms.

"Oh, you know what I mean. There's no risk; that's simply a sporting term. A fellow with sporting blood likes to pretend he's taking a chance, whether he is or not. Where did you get——" He stopped short, suddenly fancying it best not to inquire into the source of his companion's money, and in the momentary silence that followed a slow flush mounted to Roy's temples.

"The team practices a little at ten o'clock," said Rackliff, glancing at his handsome watch. "It's getting near that time. Come on over to the field and watch me throw out a bait for suckers."

"I don't think I will," said Hooker. "I believe I'd better keep away, and there won't be any talk made."

"Suit yourself," coughed Herbert, lighting an-

other cigarette. "I've got to get busy if I'm going to hook anything."

Half an hour later Rackliff strolled onto the field and took up a position near one of the players' benches, where he watched the Oakdale nine at practice. At times he smiled with a supercilious air of amusement, and especially was this noticeable when Eliot complimented the players or some one made some sort of a fumble or fluke.

Practice was brought to a close with each member of the team taking a turn at the bat, base running being cut out, however. Grant did the pitching, for Springer was "saving his arm."

Chipper Cooper hit the ball handsomely three times in succession, and relinquished the bat with a whoop of satisfaction.

"Got my eye with me to-day," he cried. "We've all got 'em peeled; everybody has. Sanger'll have his troubles. We'll win like a breeze, fellows."

"How very confident you are," said Rackliff, moving slowly forward. "You all seem to think this game is going to be a cinch for Oakdale, but

I've got an idea that you'll sing a different tune to-night."

"Oh, you have!" cried Chipper, turning on him. "Listen to Solomon, the wise man, fellers."

"I have a fancy that Barville is going to win," stated Herbert, not a whit abashed. "In fact, I believe it so much that I'm willing to make a little bet on it."

"Bet you a pint of peanuts," gurgled Chub Tuttle.

"Don't ruin yourself by such recklessness. I've got some real money."

"Dinged if he ain't a sport!" sneered Sile Crane. "He wants to bet real money on the game."

"How does it happen you have the impression that Barville will beat us, Rackliff?" inquired Roger Eliot mildly.

"Well, now, I don't mind answering that," beamed Herbert. "Barville has got a surprise for you. I'm not supposed to mention it, but I can't keep it any longer. They've got a new catcher, a friend of mine, and——"

"I suppose you think he can play the whole

game," scoffed Phil Springer. "A friend of yours, eh? Well, if he knows as much about baseball as you do, he'll be of great assistance to Barville!"

"I'm backing my knowledge with cash, if I can find anybody who has sand enough to bet with me," said Herbert.

"I'll bet you a dollar," shouted Phil.

"Only a dollar? Dear me! Can't you do any better than that? I've got fifteen long green chromos that I'd like to wager on Barville."

For a few moments this seemed to stagger the group that had gathered about him. Fifteen dollars was a lot of money, and it seemed doubtful if any other individual in the crowd, with the possible exception of Eliot, could raise as much—and Eliot would not bet.

"Wish I had fifteen dollars," muttered Crane. "I'd go him. It would be jest like findin' money."

Two or three of the boys drew aside and whispered together. Springer was one of these, and in a moment he called some others from the gathering near Herbert. There was more whispering and not a little nodding of heads, and then of a

sudden Phil turned and walked back toward the city youth.

"Rackliff," he said, "if you really mean business, if you've got fifteen dollars you want to bet on Barville, meet me at the post office at noon, and I'll have the money to go you."

"Excellent," murmured Herbert, breathing forth a little thin blue smoke. "I'll be there with my money. Don't forget the appointment, Springer."

CHAPTER VIII.

READY FOR THE GAME.

Never before had the Barville baseball team brought such a crowd of supporters into Oakdale. They came, boys and girls, wearing their school colors, bearing banners, and bringing tin horns and cowbells. The manner in which they swept into Oakdale and hurried, eager and laughing, toward the athletic field, plainly betokened their high confidence in the outcome of the contest. Even a few older persons came over from Barville on one pretext or another, and found it convenient to spend a portion of the afternoon watching the baseball game.

"Jinks!" chuckled Chipper Cooper, as he watched the visitors pour in and fill up the generous section of bleachers reserved for them. "They certainly act as if they thought they were going to have a snap to-day. Barville must be

depopulated. Never fancied so many people lived over there."

"Beyond question," said Roger Eliot quietly, "they believe their team has at least an even chance for the game; otherwise, not half so many would have made the journey to watch it."

"It must be on account of their new ketcher," muttered Sile Crane. "I cal'late they think he's the whole cheese; but mebbe they'll find aout he ain't only a small slice of the rind. What's he look like, anyhaow?"

"There he is," said Roger, as the visiting team came trotting onto the field, led by Lee Sanger, its pitcher and captain, "that stocky, red-headed chap. See him?"

"My!" grinned Cooper. "He's a bird. Looks like he could eat hardware without getting indigestion."

The Barville crowd gave their players a rousing cheer, although they did not yet venture to blow the horns or jangle the cowbells. Those noise-producing implements were held in reserve, with apparent perfect assurance that an especially

effective occasion for their use must arise during the game.

Captain Eliot shook hands cordially with Sanger, and suggested that he should at once take the field for practice.

"Hello, Roger!" called Bob Larkins, the Barville first baseman. "Great day for the game. We're going to make you fellows go some. You won't have the same sort of a cinch you had last year."

"I hope not," answered Eliot pleasantly. "There's a big crowd out to-day, and I'd like to see you fellows make the game interesting."

"Oh, don't you worry, it will be interesting enough," prophesied Larkins, getting his mitt and turning to jog down toward first.

At Eliot's elbow Phil Springer remarked, with a short laugh, in which there seemed to be a trace of nervousness: "They certainly have got their pucker up. They're boiling over with confidence."

"And it's a mistake to boil over with anything—confidence, doubt or fear," said Roger. "When the kettle boils over, the soup gets

scorched. Come, Phil, shake the kinks out of your arm with me, while they're taking their turn on the field."

His calm, unruffled manner seemed instantly to dissipate the nervousness which Phil had felt a touch of.

The practice of the visiting team was closely watched by nearly all the spectators, and it became apparent that the Barville boys had profited by the coaching of some one who had found it possible to train them with good effect. They were swift, sure and snappy in their work, displaying little of the hesitation and uncertainty usually revealed by an ordinary country school team, even in practice. Copley, the stocky, red-headed catcher from Roxbury, received the balls when they were returned from the infield and the out, catching the most of them one-handedly with the big mitt, although he seemed to do this without flourish or any attempt at grand-standing. Now and then he grinned and nodded over some especially fine catch in the outfield or clever stop of a grounder or liner by an infielder; never-

theless, he let Sanger, who was batting, do all the talking to the players.

Roy Hooker, wearing the crimson colors of his school, sat on the bleachers at the edge of the group of Oakdale Academy students, endeavoring to mask his feelings behind a pretext of loyal interest in the home nine; but, nevertheless, in spite of his inwardly reiterated assertion that he had been used "rotten," he was annoyed by a constantly recurring sense of treachery to his own team. The skill displayed in practice by the visitors in a measure set at rest the doubts he had continued to entertain concerning Rackliff's wisdom in backing Barville.

"I'll win some money to-day, all right," he thought; "but, really, I'd rather be wearing an Oakdale suit, even if we lose."

As the Barville nine came in from the field and Oakdale went out, Roy saw Herbert Rackliff saunter forth and speak to Newt Copley, who shook hands with him. Then Herbert drew Copley aside and began talking to him in very low tones, and with unusual animation. Still watching, Hooker beheld Copley nodding his head, and

even at that distance Roy could see that he was grinning.

"Hey, old Rack!" Chipper Cooper shouted from the field. "Brace him up—that's right. Tell him he's got to win or you're financially ruined."

Herbert pretended that he did not hear, and, after a final word with Copley, slowly sauntered back into the crowd. He was not wearing the Oakdale colors.

"I'm glad nobody knows that part of the money he put up was furnished by me," thought Hooker. "He's got an awful crust. I couldn't do a thing like that, and be so cheeky and unconcerned. Gee! but he'll get the fellows down on him."

And now, as the time for the game to begin was at hand, the umpire, supplied with two new balls in their boxes, called the captains of both teams and consulted with them for a moment or two. Directly Eliot sought the body protector and mask, and Bert Dingley, standing at the end of the bench on which the visitors had seated themselves, began swinging two bats. There was a rustling stir among the spectators as they set-

tled themselves down to watch the opening of the contest. The Oakdale players took their positions on the field, Rodney Grant going into right, while Chub Tuttle remained on the bench as spare man. Phil Springer had peeled off his sweater and was pulling on his light left-hand glove as he walked toward the pitcher's position.

"Ladies and gentlemen," called the youthful umpire, facing the crowd, "this is the opening game of the high school league, Barville against Oakdale. Battery for Oakdale, Springer and Eliot. Play ball!"

With that command, he tossed a clean, new baseball to Phil, who caught it with his gloved hand, glanced at it perfunctorily, gave it an unnecessary wipe against his hip, made sure his teammates were ready, and placed his left foot on the slab.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIRST INNING.

A white streak went shooting through the air; something whizzed high and close past Dingley, who dodged a bit.

"Ball one!" called the umpire.

"Spare him, Phil—don't hit him!" cried Chipper Cooper, moving about nervously.

"There's speed!" came from Sile Crane. "He can't see that kind."

"Get 'em over—please get 'em over, if you can!" entreated Bob Larkins, who had taken a position on the coaching line, near first base.

"All right, Phil," said Roger Eliot quietly and reassuringly, returning the ball. "You've got powder behind them."

Springer's nervousness had returned with redoubled force. He seemed to feel something quivering somewhere within himself, and, having forgotten to get a chew of gum, he suddenly real-

ized that his mouth was dry as a chip. When Roger called for an out, he bent the ball so wide of the plate that Eliot scarcely succeeded in stopping it.

"Oh—dear—me!" whooped Larkins. "He can't find the pan. Take a ramble, Ding; wait and he'll walk you."

To Springer's relief, Eliot did not seem disturbed. Roger signalled next for a straight one, and held up his mitt behind the inside corner of the plate. Doing his best to be steady, Phil responded by sending one over that corner; and Dingley, waiting, heard the umpire call a strike.

"Oh, yes, he'll walk him—not," laughed Cooper. "Let him wait. He'll have a chance to ramble to the bench in a minute."

Phil saw Eliot smile a bit through the meshes of the catching mask, and then, nodding at the signal for a drop, he started the ball high, but gave it the proper twist to bring it shooting down across the batter's shoulders.

"Two strikes!" declared the umpire, at which Dingley shook his head protestingly.

"My eye! He *is* a good waiter," yelled Cooper

gayly. "He's worked in a restaurant some time. You've got him now, Phil."

Trying to "pull" Dingley, Phil again used a curve that was too wide, and the third ball was called.

The batter gripped his club and stood ready, determination in his manner. The infielders crouched on their toes, and the outfielders were prepared to run in any direction. Springer leaned forward to get the signal, then swung into an elaborate delivery which he had practiced. Another drop was tried, but this time Dingley hit it. Up into the air popped the ball, and Cooper, yelling "I'll take it!" raced over behind second, to smother it surely when it came down.

Something like a sigh of relief escaped Springer's lips when he saw the ball held by the lively little shortstop, and in a measure his confidence was restored.

"They can't hit that kind out of the infield, Spring, old dandy," laughed Cooper. "You've got an elegant collection up your sleeve to-day."

The home crowd cheered, and Barville sent out Pratt, the second batter.

"Here's the next victim," cried Jack Nelson, from his position near second. "He'll be easy, too."

Pratt was clever at sacrificing, but without a runner ahead of him it was up to him to try for a hit, and he fouled the first two balls.

"Now, you've got him sure, Phil," said Cooper. "He's a regular hen-roost robber; he loves fouls. Don't let him get away, for if he does he'll crow."

As two strikes and no balls had been called, Pratt apparently expected Springer to waste the next one, and in that he made his mistake; for Phil, growing steadier, put over a sizzler on the inside corner.

"You're out!" shouted the umpire, and Pratt turned sadly and disgustedly toward the bench.

"Wonder what that Barville bunch is going to do with those horns and cowbells," cried Cooper, as the Oakdale cheer died away.

Whiting, the next batter, poked a hot one directly at Chipper, who plunged forward to get it on the first bound and made a miserable fumble. Chasing the ball, the little fellow snapped it up and threw wild to Crane.

Whiting improved his chance to take second, where he laughingly came to anchor, chaffing Cooper, who was making some very uncomplimentary remarks about himself.

"Here we go! Here we go!" roared Larkins. "Now we score. On your toes, Whiting! Here's the boy to drive you home."

Springer shivered suddenly as he saw the stocky, red-headed catcher of the visting team step into the batter's box. Something told Phil that Copley would hit the ball, and in keen apprehension he pitched the first two so wide of the plate that Eliot was forced to stretch himself to get them. Copley hunched his shoulders and grinned tauntingly at the nervous fellow on the slab.

"Aw, put one over," he urged. "Lost your nerve? Going to walk me? You don't dare——"

Apparently, he had relaxed and was holding his bat carelessly, so Phil tried to push over a swift, straight one. With a smash Copley landed on the horsehide, driving it toward right field.

"Ah!" gasped the spectators.

"Go!" yelled Larkins. "Score on it, Whiting! It's a two-bagger!"

Out there in right garden Rodney Grant was sprinting after that ball almost as it left Copley's bat. There seemed scarcely a chance for Grant to reach the whistling sphere, but he covered ground with amazing speed and leaped into the air, thrusting out his bare right hand. The ball smacked into that unprotected hand and stuck there, as Grant dropped back to the turf.

A few too eager enthusiasts on the Barville bleachers had started to blow horns and ring bells when they beheld Copley's drive shooting safely, to all appearances, into that unoccupied portion of the field; now, of a sudden, these sounds were drowned by the great yell—almost a roar—of joyous relief and exultation which burst from the Oakdale sympathizers. On those seats boys wearing the crimson colors jumped up and down, shrieking wildly, while they pounded other boys, similarly decorated, over their heads and shoulders; girls likewise screamed, waving frantically the bright banners, on each of which was emblazoned a large white letter O.

At the smash of bat and ball Phil Springer's teeth had snapped together, as if to guard his heart from leaping from his mouth; and despairingly he had whirled around to watch the course of the ball, perceiving out of the corner of his eye Whiting, with a long start off second, fairly tearing up the ground as he flew toward third on his way to the plate.

Phil likewise saw Rod Grant stretching himself to get that whistling white sphere, and even as a voice within the pitcher's brain seemed to cry, "He can't touch it!" the Texan made that amazing leap into the air and held the ball.

"Mercy!" gasped Phil. "What a catch!"

He waited for Grant, who came loping in from the field, his face flushed, his eyes full of laughter.

"Oh, you dandy!" cried Phil, giving his chum a resounding open-handed slap on the shoulder. "That was reaching for it some."

"I sure didn't think I could touch it," confessed Rod; "but I was bound to try my handsomest for it." Which was characteristic of the young Texan.

"They're cheering for you," said Phil. Then jovially he reached and lifted Rod's cap with one hand, at the same time using the other hand to give his companion's head a push, thus forcing him to bow.

Newt Copley surveyed Oakdale's right fielder disgustedly. "That was a fearful blind stab," he said sourly. "Didn't know you had it, did you?"

"Not till I looked to see," acknowledged Rod pleasantly.

Eliot gave the boy from Texas a look of approval. "That's the way to get after them," he said. "That's playing baseball and supporting a pitcher."

"I was pretty rotten, wasn't I?" said Phil with a touch of dejection.

"Far from it," returned the captain, "you were pretty good. Copley was the only man who really made a bid for a hit."

"Sure," chipped in Cooper. "I was the real, rank thing, and if they'd scored I'd been responsible for it. I should have nipped Whiting without a struggle."

Phil suddenly felt better, as it was true that none of the first four men to face him, the pick of the enemy's batters, had hit safely; for which, cutting out Grant's performance, he was immediately inclined to take the credit, due quite as much, however, to Eliot as to him.

Sanger warmed up a bit by whipping a few to Larkins at first, while Copley was buckling on the body protector and adjusting the mask. Oakdale had put her second baseman, Jack Nelson, at the head of the batting order, and Jack did not delay the game by loafing on his way into the batter's box.

"Get the first one, Sang!" barked Copley, squatting behind the plate and giving a signal. "He looks like a mark. Keep him off the pan, Mr. Umpire; make him stay in his box." Then, under his breath, speaking just loud enough for Nelson to hear, he added: "Not that it makes any difference, for you couldn't hit a balloon."

"Couldn't I!" muttered Jack, strangely annoyed, for there was something indescribably irritating about the manner in which the red-headed catcher had sneered those words.

This irritation grew when Sanger warped over two zig-zags, and Nelson missed them both. Copley made no further remark, but his husky chucklings over the batter's failures, sent the blood to Nelson's head and assisted him in finally misjudging a high one on the inside corner.

"You're out!" pronounced the umpire.

"That's the pitching, cap!" laughed Larkins. "They had their fun with you last year; now it's your turn."

Berlin Barker, regarded as an excellent batsman, was almost as easy for Sanger. True, Barker did foul the ball once, but that was the only time he touched it, and he likewise returned to the bench in a much disturbed frame of mind.

"Mr. Umpire," called Eliot, "will you keep that catcher from talking to the batters?"

"Go on!" growled Copley. "Who's talking to them? I can talk to the pitcher if I choose, and I've got a right to have a little conversation with myself."

"Don't pay any attention to him, Springer," warned Roger; "that's his trick."

Phil also missed the first ball delivered by Sanger.

"This fellow thinks he can pitch," cried Copley. "He's had a dream."

"There he goes, Mr. Umpire," cried Roger. "He's talking to the batter again."

"Oh, say, forget it!" scoffed the red-headed backstop. "I'm talking about *our* pitcher. He can't pitch a little bit—oh, no! He just dreamed he could, that's all. Put another one right over the pan, cap; there's no danger."

But Sanger, taking Copley's signal, bent one wide, and Phil fouled it off into the first base bleachers, where it was deftly caught by a spectator.

"He's in a hole," said Copley. "I wonder how these people ever got a hit off you, Sang."

The batter tried to steady himself. Two "teasers" he disdained, and then bit at a drop and was out, Sanger having fanned the first three men to face him; which seemed to justify the Barville spectators in breaking forth with their horns and bells at last, and they did so tumultuously.

CHAPTER X.

THE CRUCIAL MOMENT.

On the bleachers Roy Hooker breathed easier. "Len Roberts certainly told the truth," he thought. "Sanger is a crackerjack pitcher."

"What did you say?" asked a fellow at Roy's elbow.

"I?" gasped Hooker, startled. "I didn't say anything."

"I thought you did. I thought I heard you mutter something about Sanger. That fellow has developed, hasn't he? But we'll get onto him yet. When these strike-out twirlers go to pieces, they're liable to blow up completely. The boys will pound him before the game is over."

"I hope they do," fabricated Roy.

"If Springer only keeps steady," continued his seatmate, "it will be all right; but I'm just a little bit afraid of Phil, for he lacks the heart to stand

punishment. If they get to hitting him—well, Eliot will have to try Grant."

"Grant's no pitcher," said Roy.

"I don't know about that. He hasn't had any experience, that's true; but Springer himself has said that Rod's got the makings of one. Wasn't that a corking catch he made?"

"It was lucky for Springer."

Larkins was now up, and he proceeded to wallop the second ball pitched to him, driving it humming down the third-base line for two sacks, which caused the horns and cowbells to break into a tumultuous uproar. Sanger followed, and he straightened out a bender into a whistling line drive to the left of Chipper Cooper; whereupon Cooper made up for his error in the first inning by forking the sphere with his gloved hand and snapping it to Nelson, who leaped on to second and caught Larkins lunging hopelessly back for the sack.

The horns and cowbells were suddenly silent, while the sympathizers with the crimson frantically cheered this beautiful double play.

"Great, Chipper—simply great!" cried Springer as soon as he could get his breath.

"Oh, pretty good, pretty good," returned the little fellow, with mock modesty. "A trifling improvement on my last performance, I'll admit."

Tom Cline likewise hit the ball hard, but he lifted it into the waiting hands of Ben Stone, who scarcely moved a step from his position in center field.

"Some people have great luck," cried Newt Copley, with his eyes on the Oakdale pitcher, who was walking toward the bench. "Wait till the streak breaks, and then we'll see the airship go up."

Ben Stone got the first clean hit off Sanger, driving the ball zipping through the infield. Eliot, who followed, signaled that he would bunt, and Stone was well on his way toward second when the Oakdale captain lay a dead one down a few feet in front of the pan. Roger came near turning his attempted sacrifice into a hit, but Sanger managed to get the ball and whip it to first in time to catch the runner by a margin of the closest sort.

"That's playing the game, all right," cried Nelson from the coaching line. "Here's where we score."

"In your mind," derided Copley.

Sile Crane, trying hard to bring Stone home, made four fouls in succession, and then struck out.

"Two men, cap," grinned Copley. "Old Stoney will expire at the second station. Here's the cowboy; take his pelt, hide, horns and hoofs."

When Sanger had fooled Grant twice, it began to look as if he really would succeed in "taking his pelt"; but, declining to reach for the decoys, Rod finally met the ball on the trade mark, lining it over the center fielder's head, after which he made third before he was stopped by the wild gestures and cries of the delighted coacher, Nelson.

Roy Hooker swallowed a lump in his throat. "Why, they're hitting Sanger!" he muttered huskily.

"Hitting him!" shouted the overjoyed fellow at Roy's elbow. "They're hammering him for fair. Told you they might do it."

"But he'll brace up," said Roy. "He's got to brace up."

"Let's hope he won't till the fellows put this game on ice. Here's Cooper. He's not a strong batter, but—— Oh, gee! look a' that! Look a' that! A Texas leaguer! That scores Grant!"

Indeed, Chipper had bumped a Texas leaguer over the head of the second baseman, who made a desperate but futile effort to reach the ball; and Oakdale had every reason to cheer as Rodney Grant easily scampered home from third.

Sanger really seemed to be off his feet, and Sleuth Piper, trying for a hit, drove two fouls into the crowd on the bleachers.

"Straighten 'em out a little, Pipe," pleaded Cooper, returning for the second time to first. "You've got my tongue hanging out now."

Copley, squatting, signaled for a straight ball. Sanger, apprehensive and nervous, shook his head. Copley promptly repeated the signal, and insisted on it. Finally Sanger obeyed, putting one straight over.

Sleuth swung at that straight one, his heart full of confidence, but he missed it cleanly. In

a moment he was raging at the catcher, who had promptly snapped off his mask and tossed it aside.

"Somebody will break your head if you try that again," snarled Piper.

"What's the matter with you?" flung back Copley belligerently. "You've got bats in your belfry."

"You'll have a bat across your belfry if you repeat that trick," threatened Sleuth stiffly. "That's all I've got to say. Don't you touch my bat again when I'm hitting."

Copley laughed derisively at the excited words of the slim, angry, pale-faced fellow; and the umpire, not having seen the catcher's prestigious interference, was unable to penalize the offender.

His anxiety somewhat relieved by this termination of the home team's batting streak, Roy Hooker looked around for Rackliff, and discovered Herbert coolly sauntering down beside the ropes toward first base. As if he felt the attraction of Roy's glance, the city youth turned his head and smiled in an undisturbed manner, which was doubtless intended to convey his unshaken

confidence in the ultimate outcome of the game, and really did much to soothe and reassure his agitated friend.

As Oakdale took the field, Copley was seen speaking hurriedly to Len Roberts, who was to lead off at bat in the third. Roberts, listening, nodded, and his face was contorted by that crooked grin which always seemed trying to pull his crooked nose back into its proper place. Then, as he stepped into the box, he shot a glance toward the standees back of first, who had pushed out close to the ropes, among whom Herbert Rackliff was carelessly lighting a cigarette.

"Never mind, Barville," called Herbert in a low, yet singularly distinct, tone of voice, while Eliot was signaling to Springer. "The game is young, and I'll bet you'll win. That's *straight*."

Eliot's past experience with the visitors had taught him that Roberts rarely sought for a hit unless forced to do so, being the kind of a batter who preferred to wait and walk whenever he could; therefore the Oakdale captain signed for Springer to put the first ball over.

Barely had Sile Crane flung over his shoulder

the words, "Aw, go lay down!"—directed toward Rackliff—when, to the surprise of very many beside Eliot, Roberts landed hard on Springer's straight one, driving it toward center field. Fortunately, Stone had little trouble in reaching the ball and catching it.

"Hard luck, Len," sounded the voice of Rackliff, as Oakdale's burst of applause died down. "Hit 'em where they ain't; that's the way. Here comes the huckleberry now," he added, as Berry, the visitors' shortstop, took the place of Roberts. "He'll hit it *out*."

"This Berry will be picked in a moment," cried Cooper instantly. "He's ripe. Get him, Springer."

Crack!—Berry planted the willow against Phil's outcurve, and again the ball sailed toward the outfield, this time going toward right. Again the fielder had no trouble in reaching it ere it fell to the ground, and Grant scooped and held it while running lightly forward.

"He hit it out, sure enough," chortled Cooper. "Rack, you're ruined—financially busted wide open."

Still Herbert seemed unruffled, continuing to smile. "If I lose," he said, "I can stand it."

"But *I* can't," muttered Roy Hooker beneath his breath.

Springer, knowing Dingley, Barville's leading batter, who was again up, was dangerous, tried two wide ones to start with; but the fellow did not even wiggle his bat at them.

"Get *into* it!" called Rackliff suddenly, as Phil swung into his delivery for the third ball.

Dingley seemed to fall back from the plate a little, and again bat and ball met squarely, an inshoot being sent humming over the head of Cooper, who made a ludicrously ineffective jump for it, the ball passing at least ten feet above his outstretched hand. But Piper, leaping forward and speeding up surprisingly, made a forward lunge at the last moment, and performed a shoe-string catch that brought the entire Oakdale crowd to its feet with a shout of wonderment and delight.

Eliot calmly removed the catching mask and swung the body protector over his head. "Royal

support, Phil," he observed, as Springer trotted happily toward the bench.

"The greatest ever," returned Phil. "If they can only keep it up——"

"You'll do your part, all right," assured Roger. "Every fellow can't hit you the way those three did. Now, boys, we'll lead off with the head of the list. Let's get after Sanger again."

But apparently Sanger had recovered his best form during the brief rest on the bench, for again he fanned Nelson and Barker; and, although Springer hit the ball, it was an easy roller to the Barville twirler himself, who confidently and deliberately tossed Phil out at first.

In the meantime, one or two indignant Oakdaleites had gone at Herbert Rackliff and driven him away from the ropes back of first base, Herbert resenting their remarks concerning his loyalty, and rather warmly asserting that he had a right to bet his money according to the dictates of his judgment.

In the fourth Springer's work justified the confidence Eliot had expressed, for he followed Sanger's example by striking out Pratt and Whiting

and forcing the dangerous Copley to hit weakly to the infield.

"Another goose egg for them," exulted Chipper Cooper. "It begins to look like a shut-out. These two tallies of ours may be a-plenty."

"You don't want to get any such an idea into your head," returned Eliot promptly. "Two runs are mighty few; we must have more. Here's Old Stone, who started us going before."

Stone started it again with a cracking two-bagger, and, when Eliot poked a daisy cutter into right, Ben scored on it.

The efforts of the coachers to put Sanger off his feet, however, were fruitless, Crane fanning, Grant expiring on a foul which Copley took thirty feet behind the pan, and Cooper perishing in an effort to beat a slow grounder to first.

With the beginning of the fifth Rackliff again called encouragement to the batters, having strolled back to the ropes a little further down beyond first base. He urged them to "get into it," "hit it out," "drop on it," "give it a rise," and, as if braced by his cries, they began slaughtering Springer mercilessly. Sanger singled;

Cline poked one past Cooper; and Roberts, once more surprising everybody by smashing the first ball, doubled and brought both runners home.

And now once more Springer's nerves were a-quiver in every part of his body. In his disturbed state he actually swallowed the chew of gum he had procured. Rattled, he hit Berry in the ribs, and handed Dingley a pass, filling the bases.

"It's all off! It's all over but the shouting!" yelled Sanger, dancing and waving his arms on the coaching line near third. "Got him going, fellows! Don't let up! Here's where we win the game!"

CHAPTER XI.

A CHANGE OF PITCHERS.

The green banners were fluttering like leaves in a furious tempest; horns, cowbells and human voices sent a wild uproar across the diamond; Springer, white as a sheet, his confidence totally shattered, was all to the bad. Another clean hit would almost certainly permit two Barville runners to score and put the visitors one tally in the lead.

And not a man was out!

Knowing something must be done at once or the game would doubtless be lost in that inning, Eliot threw the ball to Barker, so that Berlin might hold the man on third, and, calling Phil, stepped forward and met him in front of the pan.

"Play ball! play ball!" yelled Sanger. "Don't delay the game!" And, "Play ball! play ball!" howled the Barville spectators.

Coolly, calmly, soothingly, the Oakdale captain spoke in a low tone to the unnerved pitcher. "Brace up, Phil, old fellow," he urged. "Take your time; stop pitching as fast as you can soak the ball over. You're not using your head. If you'll steady down we can pull out of this hole. Now, go slow, and don't mind the racket." For a moment his right hand touched Springer's left shoulder with a steadying pressure.

"I'll try," promised Phil huskily. "I'll do my best, captain."

While the visitors still howled, "Play ball," Roger stood on the plate and fussed with the strap of his catching mask, which did not need any attention whatever to begin with, but somehow became strangely tangled in the wire meshes. From his appearance one might have fancied Eliot stone deaf to that babel of sounds, and he seemed utterly blind when Larkins rushed out from the bench before him, flourishing his arms, and demanding that he should get back into his position and let the game proceed.

Such a show of outward calm should have done much to restore the equanimity of the

pitcher; but, though Springer tried hard to get a steadying grip on himself, his fear of what might happen if Pratt hit him led him to pitch himself into a still worse predicament; and he handed up three balls, one after another, in an effort to fool the Barville boy. The shouts of the coachers, urging Pratt to "take a walk" and asserting that it was "a dead sure thing," added in the completion of Phil's undoing; for, even though he did his best to put a straight one over, the ball was outside, and Pratt capered exultantly to first, while Roberts, grinning all over one side of his face, jogged home.

"Take him out!" Some one in the Oakdale crowd uttered the cry, and immediately a dozen others took it up. "Take him out! Take him out!" they adjured.

These appeals were unnecessary, for already Eliot had decided that Phil could not continue, and was beckoning for Grant to come in, a signal which Rodney did not at first seem to comprehend. Presently the Texan started slowly in from the field, and Springer, at the umpire's call

of "time," turned, his head drooping, toward the bench.

"Hadn't you better take right, Phil?" suggested Eliot.

The heartsick fellow shook his head. "I wouldn't be any good out there—now," he muttered.

So Tuttle was sent into right, while Grant limbered up his arm a bit by throwing a few to Sile Crane.

"Here's something still easier, fellows," called Newt Copley. "Perhaps he can throw a lasso, but he can't pitch baseball. Keep it up. Don't stop."

"Play!" ordered the umpire.

Rod Grant toed the pitcher's slab for the first time in a real game of baseball, wondering a bit if he was destined to receive a continuation of the unkind treatment that had put "the blanket" on his predecessor.

In the meantime, Herbert Rackliff had been collared by Bunk Lander, a big, husky village boy, whose face was ablaze with wrath and whose

manner betrayed an almost irresistible yearning to punch the city youth.

"You keep your trap closed," rasped Lander, "or I'll knock your block off! If you utter another peep during this game, I'll button up both your blinkers so tight it'll take a doctor to pry 'em open. Get that?"

"Take your hands off me!" cried Herbert indignantly. "How dare you!"

"How dast I!" snarled Lander. "I'll show you how I dast if you wag your jaw any more."

"I've got a right to talk; everybody else does."

"You double-faced, sneaking son of a sea-cook!" blazed Lander. "You bet against your own school team, did ye? If you belonged in Barville you might howl your head off; but as long's you camp around these diggin's you won't do no rooting for them fellers. I'm going to keep right on your co't-tail the rest of the time, and the first yip you make I'll hand ye a bunch of fives straight from the shoulder. Now, don't make no further gab to me unless you're thirsting to wear a mark of my esteem for the next few days."

Even as Lander uttered these words Grant pitched the first ball, and Whiting hit it—hit it humming straight into the hands of Chipper Cooper, who snapped it to third for a double play, before Berry could get back to the sack.

What a howl of joyous relief went up from the Oakdale crowd! They cheered Chipper madly, and the little fellow, crimson-faced and happy, grinned as he gave a tug at his cap visor.

But now came the great Copley, the most formidable Barvilleite, and there were still two runners waiting impatiently on the sacks, ready to make the best of any kind of a hit.

"Don't worry about this chap, Grant," called Eliot quietly. "He's just as easy as anybody. You'll get him."

At this Copley laughed sneeringly, but he missed the first ball Rod delivered to him, which happened to be one of the new pitcher's wonderful drops. The uproar coming from the Barville bleachers seemed to have no effect on Grant, something which Eliot observed with satisfaction and rising hope. Rod pitched two balls which

Copley disdained, and then he fooled the fellow once more with a drop.

"Two strikes!" shouted the umpire.

"You've got him, Roddy—you've got him cold!" cried Cooper suddenly. "Don't forget we're all behind you. Take his scalp, you old Injun hunter of the Staked Plains."

High and close to Copley's chin the ball whistled into Eliot's mitt. For a moment there seemed some doubt as to its nature, but the umpire pronounced it a "ball."

"Close, Grant—close," said Eliot. "You should have had him. Never mind, you'll get him next time."

There was a hush. Involuntarily, the Barville crowd ceased its uproar. Grant, taking Roger's signal, nodded and twisted the ball into the locking grip of two fingers and a thumb. His arm swung back and whipped forward, a white streak shooting with a twisting motion from those fingers. It seemed like another swift one, shoulder high, and, with confidence strong in his heart, the red-headed batter sought to meet it.

For the third time the ball took a most amaz-

ing shoot toward the ground, and again Copley did not even graze it. The umpire shouted, "You're out!" but the roar from Oakdale's side of the field drowned his voice.

CHAPTER XII.

WON IN THE NINTH.

The cheer captain was leading them with wildly waving arms. "Grant!" they thundered. "Rah! rah! rah! Grant! Grant! Grant!"

"That sure was some lucky," said Rod, walking toward the bench.

"Lucky!" rejoiced Cooper, jogging at his side. "It was ball playing! It was pitching!"

"You pulled me through by that catch and double play," said the young Texan modestly. "That put me on my pins. I'm sorry Phil got his."

Springer looked disconsolate enough as Rod took a seat beside him on the bench. "Don't worry, old partner," begged Rodney. "It happens to every pitcher sometimes. The best of them get it occasionally. Perhaps I won't last."

"If you don't," returned Springer, "the game is a goner. There's no one else to put in. I

gave it away when I lost my control. Queer I couldn't get the ball over."

"I saw that we couldn't keep you in any longer, Phil," said Eliot. "I had to take you out."

"Oh, that's all right," muttered the unhappy fellow. "That's baseball."

With the score tied, Barville showed a disposition to fight grimly for the game. Piper fell a victim to the wiles of Sanger; Nelson's scorching grounder was scooped by Roberts; and away out in left garden Dingley made a brilliant running catch of Barker's splendid long drive. The sixth inning opened with the two teams on even terms and Grant pitching for Oakdale.

Rodney's most effective ball was his drop, but Eliot, knowing it would be poor judgment if the pitcher should use that particular ball too often, called for it only in emergencies. The emergency rose when, with only one man out, Sanger singled and stole second, Nelson dropping Roger's throw. With Sanger playing well off the sack, there was a chance for him to score if Cline banged out a long safety, so Eliot, consulting hastily with Grant, urged Rod to use the drop every time he

put the ball over. Cline finally managed to hit one of those drops, but he simply rolled a weak grounder into the diamond, and gave up the ghost on his way to first, Sanger taking third on the throw.

Ready to bat, Len Roberts' gaze wandered toward the spectators back of the ropes near first base; but, if he hoped to receive any encouragement from Herbert Rackliff, he was disappointed, as Bunk Lander, true to his promise, was keeping within arms' length of the irritated and uneasy city youth. Rackliff, having surveyed Bunk's stocky figure from head to foot and taken a good look at the fellow's grim, homely mug, smoked cigarettes and uttered no sound save an occasional suppressed cough.

It would be hard to describe the feelings of Roy Hooker. He had been elated by Springer's misfortune and the success of Barville in tying the score, but the failure of the visitors to get a lead left him still worried and anxious. Especially was this true as he watched Rodney Grant pitch with surprising steadiness and hold the crimson players down.

"But he can't keep it up," thought Roy; "it's impossible. They'll fall on him the way they did on Springer."

Roberts, who had hitherto batted with an air of confidence, now fell into his old trick of waiting, the result being that two strikes were called on him before he removed the bat from his shoulder. Then he bit at a wide one, and was out.

Tuttle, hitting in Springer's place, was a snap for Sanger, who polished him off with three high, swift, straight ones. For the third time in the game, Stone showed his mettle and went to first on a safety. As one man was out, Eliot, thinking to test Copley's throwing, signaled for Ben to steal. There was nothing the matter with Copley's wing, for he nailed Stone fully five feet from the second sack.

Roger batted a sizzler to the left of Sanger, who shot out his gloved hand and deflected the ball straight into the waiting fingers of Larkins at first.

Grant pitched fairly well in the seventh, but it needed the errorless support he received to prevent the enemy from scoring, Barville pushing

a runner round to third before being forced to give up.

Sanger, working hard, disposed of Crane on strikes, forced Grant to pop to the infield, and led Cooper into lifting an easy foul for Copley. The red-headed catcher continued to talk to the batters, but, warned by Eliot, they made no retort, and, seemingly, did not hear him. Since the affair with Piper he had not, however, again offered to deflect a bat.

It was a great game to watch, a game in which those high school boys, keyed to a keen tension, were really outdoing themselves, performing more than once feats which would have been creditable to professionals. It was the kind of baseball that makes the blood tingle, the heart throb, and leaves many an enthusiastic spectator husky from howling. The strain was so great that it seemed an assured thing that something must give way. Oakdale had saved herself temporarily by changing pitchers, but shortly after the opening of the eighth inning it began to look as if the fatal downfall of the home team had simply been delayed.

Larkins led off by batting a dust scorcher against Cooper's shins, and once more Chipper marred his record by booting the ball and throwing wild to first when he finally got hold of it. This let the runner romp easily to second.

Copley was seen to whisper something in Sanger's ear as the Barville captain rose from the bench, bat in hand. Then Lee walked into the box and bunted beautifully along the line toward first. He was thrown out by Grant, but his purpose had been accomplished, and Larkins was on third, with only one man down.

Fearing an attempted squeeze play, Eliot signaled for Rod to keep the ball high and close on Cline. Roger had made no mistake in judgment, and, despite the Texan's effort to baffle the hitter, Cline managed to bump a roller into the diamond. Cooper, charging in, scooped the sphere and snapped it underhand to Eliot; for Larkins, having started to dig gravel with the first motion of Grant's arm, was doing his utmost to score.

"Slide!" shrieked the coachers.

Larkins obeyed, and there might have been

some dispute over the umpire's decision had not the ball slipped out of Roger's fingers just as he poked it onto the prostrate fellow.

"Safe!" announced the umpire, with a downward motion of his outspread hand.

The coachers capered wildly, while Copley, leaping forward, met Larkins, who had risen, and ostentatiously assisted in brushing some of the dirt from his clothes. The Barville crowd behaved like a bunch from a lunatic asylum. Roy Hooker told himself that Grant must surely go to pieces now. "If Eliot had given me a show," he whispered to himself, "I might go in there now and stop the slaughter."

Apparently the Texan was confused, seeing which, Cline attempted to purloin the sack behind his back, only to be caught easily when Rod turned and snapped the ball to Nelson.

This cheered the sympathizers with the home team, who were heartened still more as, a few moments later, the amazingly calm Texan took the crooked-nosed Roberts in hand and struck him out.

"Now, let's play ball and hold this lead, fel-

lows," shouted Copley. "It's easy enough. We've got the game nailed."

Sanger had no trouble in fanning Piper, and again Oakdale's hope ebbed, as Nelson, who had not made a safety for the day, was sent by the whiff route to join Sleuth on the mourners' bench.

With two gone, Berlin Barker got his first hit. There rose a groan, however, when it was seen that roly-poly Chub Tuttle was the next sticker. Tuttle justified the hopeless ones by popping a dinky little fly into Sanger's hands.

"It's all off! It's all over!" crowed Copley, tossing the catching mask spinning aside. "You've only got to get three more, cap. The way you're pitching, it'll be like picking ripe fruit."

"But let's get some more tallies if we can," urged Sanger.

This, however, was not possible; for Grant gave his prettiest exhibition in the ninth, striking out three fellows in succession with that perplexing drop, which apparently he had mastered.

"This is our last chance, boys," said Eliot, as the locals gathered at the bench. "One run is a

small margin, and no game is lost until it's won."

Ben Stone, his face as grim as that of a graven image, stood forth and waited. Two balls he ignored, one of which was called a strike; and then, seeming to get one to his liking, he planted the club against the leather with a sharp, snapping swing. As in practice on the day Hooker had pitched to him, Stone laced the ball straight over the center-field fence for a home run, and pandemonium broke loose and continued while he jogged slowly over the bases.

The score was again tied.

Roy Hooker had not been fully at ease, and his face turned almost ashen as he saw the ball disappearing beyond the fence. He took no part in the crazy demonstration of his schoolmates, declining even when some one caught him by the shoulders and shouted in his ear, asking why he did not cheer.

At the bench Stone was surrounded and congratulated by his delighted teammates. Even the disconsolate Springer aroused himself enough to speak a word of praise.

"We want another one—only one more," said Eliot, as he found a bat and turned toward the plate.

Without seeking to "kill" Sanger's speed, Roger did his best to poke out a safety, and would have succeeded only for a surprising one-handed stop by Roberts, who got the ball to first for an unquestioned put-out.

"It's only a matter of an extra inning," cried Copley. "They've had all their luck; it's over."

Crane, following Eliot, made the mistake of trying for a long hit, and Sanger fanned him.

Grant came up with two men out.

"Here's the great cowboy twirler, cap," sneered Copley. "Put the iron to him. Burn your brand deep."

"Get a hit, Grant—do get a hit!" came the entreaty from the Oakdale crowd.

"If you do," muttered Copley, close under the bat, "I'll swallow the ball."

A moment later Rod swung at a corner cutter, whirled all the way round, and sprang at Copley, a look of such blazing wrath in his eyes that the red-headed catcher retreated with ludicrous haste.

"You onery, sheep-herding skunk!" rasped the Texan. "If you touch my bat again, I'll grease the ground with you! They'll sure carry you home on a stretcher, and you can bet your life on that!"

Again the umpire had not seen the interference, so cleverly had Copley perpetrated the trick. Eliot dashed at Grant and seized him, shouting for the Oakdale crowd to keep back; for at least twenty indignant persons were moving toward the diamond. There was a temporary delay, during which Roger spoke earnestly into Grant's ear.

"Don't lose your head now, old fellow," pleaded the Oakdale captain. "That's what he wants you to do. He thinks you can't hit the ball if you're mad."

"I reckon you're right," said Rodney, getting a grip on himself; "but he'll sure have a broken head if he does it again."

Having seen that look of rage in the Texan's eyes, Newt Copley was not at all disposed to repeat the trick with him. Apparently Grant's nerves had been somewhat unstrung, for when the game was again resumed he missed one of

Sanger's shoots by something like a foot, and the second strike was called by the umpire. Then Rod smiled; it was barely a faint flicker, but Sanger saw it and wondered. His wonderment turned to dismay when the Texan skillfully poked a safety through the infield and went romping to first, cheered by the crowd.

"Never mind, cap," encouraged Copley; "the weak ones follow. You won't have any trouble with this undersized accident." A remark which inflamed Cooper, in spite of Chipper's pretense that he did not hear it.

On the very first ball handed up to the Oakdale shortstop, Grant, having got a start, raced down the line to second, slid spikes first, and was declared safe, Copley failing to get the ball to Roberts in time for a put-out.

But the Texan did not stop there. With Sanger's next movement of his regular delivery, Rodney, having got a lead behind the pitcher's back, went darting toward third. Copley, who had complained that Roberts was slow about tagging the runner, uttered a yell, took the ball as it came

high above Cooper's shoulders, and lost no time in throwing to third.

Pratt had not anticipated an immediate second effort to steal by the runner, and he was a trifle slow about covering the sack. As a result, he was forced to reach for the ball with his bare right hand, and he dropped it.

The home crowd was on its feet now, shouting wildly as the umpire's downward gesture with both hands proclaimed the daring Texan safe at third.

Copley snarled at Pratt, and Sanger plainly showed that the performance of Grant had put him on the anxious seat.

The cheering now was incessant from both sides of the field, and this was not calculated to soothe the nerves of the worried pitcher. Nevertheless, had not Berry lost his head and forgotten that two were out, the game would have gone into extra innings. Cooper finally drove one toward the Barville shortstop, and Berry, leaping forward to catch the ball, saw Grant dashing toward the plate. Berry should have thrown to first, but, with his mind temporarily fogged, his

ERE THE HORSEHIDE WAS BROUGHT DOWN BETWEEN ROD'S SHOULDER BLADES, HIS HAND HAD FOUND THE PLATE.

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only thought was to stop that run, and he hurled the ball to the plate. Copley was not prepared for this manœuvre, and he leaped to get the whistling sphere, which, however, came high and wide, forcing him to reach for it.

The umpire had barely time to run forward a short distance ere he stopped and crouched as Grant flung himself headlong in a slide. Getting the ball, Copley swung back to tag the runner, but ere the horsehide was brought down between Rod's shoulder-blades, his hand had found the plate.

"Safe!" shouted the umpire.

And the game was won by the pitcher who had taken Springer's place in the fifth inning.

CHAPTER XIII.

RACKLIFF'S TREACHERY.

Like one stunned Roy Hooker passed out through the gate and turned down the street, dully conscious of the continued rejoicing uproar behind him. Alternately buoyed by hope and weighted by fear, he had passed the most trying hour of his life, and now in his bosom he carried a heart that seemed sick and faint and scarcely able to pump the blood through his veins.

"I was a fool to listen to Rackliff," he muttered; and over and over he kept repeating, "I was a fool, a fool!"

Suddenly apprehensive lest he should be overtaken by some one who might observe his all-too-evident wretchedness, he quickened his steps and made straight for his home. He did not enter the house, and as he slipped through the yard he cast sidelong glances toward the windows, hoping his

mother might not be looking out. In the carriage house he sat down on the box beside his motorcycle.

"I was a fool—an awful fool!" he kept repeating.

Presently, his mind running over the game, feature by feature, he began to realize that he had not felt as much elation as he would have supposed might come to him on witnessing Springer's misfortune in the fifth inning. He had imagined it would afford him unreserved exultation to see Phil batted out of the box, but his rejoicing had been most remarkably alloyed by an emotion of another sort, which even now he could not understand. And, as he sat there, slowly but surely he began to perceive the real reason for Springer's failure.

"It was lack of control," he finally exclaimed. "That's just it. He was pitching all right until they broke his nerve by three hits in succession. After that he couldn't find the pan to save his life. If he'd been able to put the ball where he wished and steady down a little, he might have stopped that batting rally and had the satisfac-

tion of pitching the game through to a successful finish. Now, Rod Grant gets all the glory."

He was still sitting there, obsessed by his dismal meditations, when a shadow appeared in the doorway, and he looked up to see Rackliff, the stub of a cigarette in his fingers, gazing at him. For a full minute, perhaps, neither boy spoke; and then Herbert, tossing the smoking stub over his shoulder, sunk his hands deep in his pockets and uttered two words:

"Hard luck."

"Rotten," said Roy. "But you certainly were all to the punk in your judgment about that game."

"Oh, I don't know," objected Herbert, leaning against the side of the doorway and crossing his tan-shod feet. "Barville should have won."

"How do you make that out?"

"They batted Springer out, didn't they? They sent him to the stable, all right."

"He lost his control, and Eliot had to take him out."

"Well, if *you* hadn't been mistaken in your judgment, that would have settled the game."

"If *I* hadn't been mistaken!" cried Roy resentfully.

"Precisely."

"Why, I don't see——"

"Don't you? Then you should consult an oculist. You said Springer was the only pitcher the team had; you insisted that Grant couldn't pitch a winning game."

"Well, I know," faltered Roy; "but I——"

"You were mistaken—sadly mistaken. It's been an expensive blunder in judgment for both of us."

A flush rose into Hooker's pale cheeks, and he stood up. "Now, look here, Mr. Rackliff," he said harshly, "don't you try to shoulder it all on to me. I won't stand for that. You professed to be dead sure that under any circumstances Barville could down Oakdale. As to the matter of expense, it may have been expensive for you, but, according to our distinctly understood agreement, I don't lose anything."

Herbert lifted his eyebrows slightly, producing his cigarette case and fumbling in it vainly, as it was empty.

"Agreement?" he said. "What agreement?"

Hooker choked. "You know; don't pretend that you don't know. I hope you're not going back on your word. If you do——" He stopped, unable to continue.

"Oh, yes," said Herbert slowly, "I think I know what you mean. Of course I'm not going back on my word to a pal."

"Then give me the money I let you have to bet on Barville."

"Why, that money's gone. We lost it."

"Yes, but you pledged yourself to make good any loss I might sustain. There are reasons why I must have that money back—right away, too."

"I'm sorry," murmured Herbert, regretfully returning the empty cigarette case to his pocket; "but I'm afraid you'll have to wait a while. I went broke myself—haven't got a whole dollar left in the exchequer."

"But I've *got* to have it," insisted Roy huskily. "I depended on getting it back to-night."

Herbert laughed and snapped his yellow fingers. "When a thing is impossible, it can't be done, old fellow. You don't need money in this

dead hole, anyhow. Why, a profligate couldn't spend ten dollars a week here, if he tried. You'll simply have to wait until my old man coughs up another consignment of the needful."

Roy sat down again, his face wearing such a look of dismay that Herbert was both puzzled and amused.

"To see you now," observed the city youth, "any one might fancy you a bank cashier who had speculated disastrously with the funds of the institution. Four dollars and sixty-five cents—that was the amount of your loss; and you look as if you had dropped a thousand."

"I want to tell you something," said Hooker suddenly; but again he stopped short and seemed to find it impossible to proceed.

"I'm listening," encouraged Rackliff. "Let it come. Great Scott! I'd like to have a cigarette."

But Roy, after remaining silent a few moments longer, slowly shook his head. "I won't tell you," he muttered; "I can't. But look here, Rack, you've got to get that money for me as soon as you can. I need it—if you only knew how I need it!"

"I'll drop my old pater a line to-night, informing him that I'm financially ruined. Gee! that makes me think of that little runt, Cooper! He certainly irritated me some by his insolent yapping."

"You came pretty near getting into trouble trying to coach Barville. You certainly had your nerve with you. I'd never had the crust to try that."

Herbert frowned. "It would have been all right, only for that big stiff, Bunk Lander. He threatened to punch me up, and I knew he was just the sort of a brainless fellow to do it. Only for his interference, Barville would have taken the game, and we'd be on Easy Street to-night."

"Eh?" exclaimed Roy, puzzled again. "I don't think I quite get you. I don't see how Lander's interference with you had anything to do with the result of the game."

The city youth coughed and shrugged his shoulders, a singularly crafty smile playing over his face.

"Of course, you don't see," he nodded. "I'll admit that I was somewhat too hasty. I should

have waited a while longer before I attempted to put in my oar. That was where *I* blundered; but I didn't quite reckon on Lander."

"You've got me guessing. I wish you'd explain."

"I will. Did you think I took that journey to Barville on your old motorcycle merely for recreation?"

"Not exactly; I had an idea you went over there to talk with Copley and Roberts for the purpose of finding out how strong the Barville nine really was."

"Well, that was a part of the reason, but not the whole of it. I had something else on my mind. In case I became satisfied that the two teams were pretty evenly matched, I had a little plan through which I felt confident I could make it a dead sure thing for Barville. I was not off my base, either, and it would have worked out charmingly if that big duffer, Lander, hadn't dipped in and messed it for us."

"I'm still in the dark."

"Don't you remember that when I got back I asked you about Eliot's signals to the pitcher?"

"Yes."

"I thought I knew them, but I wanted to be dead sure; for I'd made arrangements with Copley to tip off certain Barville batters who could be trusted to the kind of balls that would be pitched. This was to be done in case the necessity arose, which it did when Oakdale took the lead and Springer seemed to be going well, with every prospect of holding them down. Then I proceeded to get down close to the ropes back of first base, where, by watching, I could come pretty near catching Eliot's signs. Sometimes I couldn't see them distinctly, but almost always I could. I was tipping off the Barville batters when they proceeded to fall on Springer and pound him beautifully. They did so because they knew just the kind of a ball he was going to pitch."

"Great Cæsar!" muttered Roy, who was again standing. "You did that? How——"

"Oh, I'm surprised at your dullness," laughed Rackliff. "You heard me coaching. You heard me calling out for the batters to 'get into it,' 'hit it out,' 'drop on it,' 'give it a rise,' and so forth."

"Yes."

"Yes; well, there you are. When I said 'get into it,' it meant that Springer would pitch an inshoot. 'Hit it out,' meant that he would use an outcurve, and——"

"Holy smoke!" gasped Hooker. "It's a wonder nobody got on. Do you suppose Lander——"

"Nit. That big bonehead didn't tumble. He was simply sore because I was a student at Oakdale and seemed to be rooting for Barville. All the same, he stuck to me like a leech, and I had to quit or get into a nasty fight with him. I couldn't afford to have my face beaten up, even to win ten dollars. By Jove! I've simply got to have a whiff."

In silence Hooker watched the shifty, scheming, treacherous city youth turn and search on the drive outside the door, recover the cigarette stub he had tossed away, relight it, and inhale the smoke with a relish that told of a habit fixed beyond breaking. Thus watching and thinking of the fellow's qualmless treachery to his own school team, Roy felt the first sensation of revulsion toward Rackliff.

CHAPTER XIV.

JEALOUSY.

At the close of the game there was another boy on the field who was quite as glum and downcast as Hooker himself. This was Phil Springer, who remained seated on the bench while his teammates and a portion of the enthusiastic crowd swarmed, cheering, around Grant and lifted him to their shoulders.

Presently he realized that this behavior on his part must attract attention the moment the excitement relaxed, and he got up with the intention of hurrying at once to the gymnasium. Barely had he started, however, when something brought him to a halt, and beneath his breath he muttered:

"That won't do. They'd notice that, too, and sus-say I was jealous."

He was jealous—bitterly so; but he forced himself to join the cheering crowd and to make a

half-hearted pretense of rejoicing. All the while he was thinking that Grant owed everything to him, and that perhaps he had been foolish in training a fellow to fill his shoes in such an emergency. For Phil had long entertained the ambition of becoming the first pitcher on the academy nine, and this year he had been fully confident until the present hour that the goal he sought was his beyond dispute.

The victors did not forget to cheer courteously for the vanquished, and Barville returned the compliment with a cheer for Oakdale.

So many persons wished to shake hands with Rodney Grant that he laughingly protested, saying they would put his "wing out of commission." Suddenly perceiving Phil, the Texan pushed aside those between them, sprang forward and placed a hand on Springer's shoulder, crying:

"Here's my mentor. Only for him, I'd never been able to do it. I owe what little I know about pitching to Springer. Let's give him a cheer, fellows."

They did so, but that cheer lacked the spon-

taneous enthusiasm and genuine admiration which had been thrown into the cheering for Grant, something which Springer did not fail to note.

"Oh, thanks," said Phil, weakly returning the warm grasp of Rod's strong hand. "I didn't do anything—except blow up."

Under cover of the chatter, joking and laughter, while they were changing their clothes in the dressing room of the gymnasium, Grant, observing the dejection Springer could not hide to save himself, again uttered some friendly words of encouragement.

"Don't you feel so bad about it, old partner," he said. "The best professional pitchers in the business get their bumps sometimes, and I might have got mine, all right, if I'd started the game on the slab, as you did. You'll make up for that next time."

"You're very kind, Grant," was Springer's only response.

Phil got away from the others as soon as he could, and hurried home to brood over it. It had been a hard blow, and he had stood up poorly

beneath it. Thinking the matter over in solitude, he was forced into a realization of the fact that he lacked, in a great measure, the confidence and steadiness characteristic of Rodney Grant, and he could not put aside the conviction that it was Grant, the fellow he had coached, who was destined to become the star pitcher of the nine. In spite of himself, this thought, aided by other unpleasant contemplations, awoke in his heart a sensation of envious resentment toward Rodney. He was sorry now that he had ever spent his time teaching the Texan to pitch, and it occurred to him that the same amount of coaching and encouragement bestowed upon Hooker would not have resulted in the training of a man to outdo him upon the slab and push him into the background.

That evening he was missing from the group of boys who gathered in the village to talk over the game, and at school the following Monday he kept away from Grant as much as it was possible for him to do so. When practice time came after school was over, he put on his suit and ap-

peared upon the field, but soon complained that he was not feeling well, and departed.

The following morning, shortly after breakfast, Phil saw Rod turning into the dooryard of his home. Instantly Springer sought his hat, slipped hastily through the house and got out, unperceived, by the back door. When he arrived at school, a few minutes before time for the morning session to begin, Grant was waiting for him.

"What became of you after breakfast, partner?" questioned Rod. "I piked over to your ranch looking for you, but you had disappeared. Your mother said you were around a few moments before, and she thought you must be somewhere about; all the same, I couldn't find hide or hair of you."

"I—I took a walk," faltered Phil, flushing. "I've got a bub-bad cold." In evidence of which, he coughed in a shamefully unnatural manner.

"Got a cold, eh?" said Rodney sympathetically. "You caught it sitting on the bench during the last four innings of that game, I reckon. I re-

member now that you didn't even put on your sweater."

"Yes, I guess that's when I got it," agreed Phil.

"Well, you've got to shake it in time for the game with Clearport. That's when you'll even things up."

All that day Springer sought to avoid talking baseball with any of the fellows, for invariably they spoke of Grant's surprisingly successful performance; and when they did so something like a sickening poison seemed to bubble within the jealous youth, who told himself that he could not long continue to join in this praise, but must soon betray himself by bursting forth into a tirade against the Texan. In a measure he did relieve his feelings by expressing his opinion of Herbert Rackliff, who was brazenly seeking to ignore the open disdain of his schoolmates. He did not come out for practice that night, and Grant explained to the others that Phil was knocked out by a cold, whereupon Cooper chucklingly remarked that he thought it was Barville that had knocked Springer out.

Shortly before dark, Phil, chancing to take a cross cut from Middle Street to High Street, observed Roy Hooker pelting away with a baseball at the white shingle on the barn. Drawing near, Phil asked Roy what he was doing, and the latter, startled and perspiring, looked round.

"Oh, is it you?" said Roy. "I thought perhaps it was Rackliff. I'm practicing a little by my lonesome."

"That's a hard way to practice," said Springer. "You can't get much good out of that."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm getting so I can hit that shingle once in a while, and use a curve, too. I couldn't seem to hit it with a straight ball when I began."

"You haven't given up the idea of pitching?"

"Not quite. After watching your performance Saturday—seeing you soak a batter in the ribs, and then hand out free passes enough to force a run—I came to realize what control means. I'm trying to get it."

Phil felt his face burn. "Control is necessary," he admitted; "but it isn't everything. When I put the ball over, they pup-pounded it."

"But they wouldn't if it hadn't been for——" Choking, as he realized what he had so nearly said, Hooker bit his tongue. Then he hastened to make an observation that snapped Springer's self-restraint. "They didn't seem to pound Grant much, and he appeared able to put the ball just about where he wanted to."

"Grant!" snarled Phil furiously. "That's all I've heard since the game! Grant, Grant, Grant! It makes me tired!"

"Oh, ho!" muttered Roy. "It does, does it? Well, say, didn't you realize what you were doing while you were coaching that fellow? *I* knew what would happen. *I* knew the time would come when you'd be mighty sore with yourself. I'm going to talk plain to you. This fellow Grant is practically an outsider; he doesn't belong in Oakdale. He's a presuming cub, too—always pushing himself forward. Here I am, an Oakdale boy, but you pick up with Rod Grant and coach him to pitch so he can step into a game when you're batted out and show you up. You won't be in it hereafter; he'll be the whole show."

"Oh, I don't know," returned Springer sourly. "He may get his some time."

"He may, and then again he may not; you can't be sure of it. If you'd only spent your time with me, I would have been willing to act as second string pitcher, and you would not have been crowded out. You put your foot in it, all right, old man."

"I suppose I did. But let's not talk about it. You weren't at school to-day."

"No."

"How did that happen?"

"Working."

"Working? How careless! I didn't know you ever did such a thing."

"Well," said Roy slowly, "this was a case of necessity, you see."

"Oh, you needed the money, eh?"

"No; it wasn't that, though I earned a dollar and a quarter helping shingle John Holbrook's barn. You see—my mother, she—she lost some money recently."

"Lost it?"

"Yes; lost it, or—or something," Roy replied

stumblingly. "It wasn't much, but it was all she had. She'd saved up a little at a time to buy material for a new dress."

"How did she happen to lul-lose it?"

"I can't tell. She doesn't quite know herself. She put it in a drawer in the house, and when she went to look for it, it was gone."

"That sounds like a robbery instead of a loss."

"But it couldn't be a robbery," protested Hooker quickly and earnestly. "Nobody would come into the house and take money out of that drawer—nobody around here. You never hear of such a thing happening around this town. Perhaps mother mislaid it somewhere. Anyhow, it's gone, and I'm going to try to earn enough to replace it."

"Well, say, Hooker," exclaimed Phil, "you're all right! I didn't suppose you'd stoop to work, even under such circumstances. Do you know, lots of times we're liable to misjudge some one until something happens to show us just the sort of a person he is."

"Yes; I suppose that's right," said Roy. But he did not look Phil in the eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

PLAIN TALK FROM ELIOT.

"How's your cold, Phil?"

It was Eliot who asked the question, and Springer, pausing with one foot on the academy steps, replied:

"Oh, it's some bub-better, I think."

"Glad to hear it," said Roger, slipping his arm through Springer's. "Come on, let's walk over yonder to the fence. I want to have a little chin with you. It will be ten minutes yet before school begins."

Together they walked to the fence at the back of the yard, pausing beneath one of the tall old trees which was putting forth tender green leaves. Leaning against the fence, the captain of the nine faced his companion.

"As a rule," he began, "you've been a great enthusiast over baseball, and I didn't think you'd

let a slight cold keep you away from practice. Exercise is one of the best remedies for a cold, if a person takes care of himself when he's through exercising."

"I know that," said Phil, poking his toe into an ant's nest and declining to meet Roger's steady, level gaze; "but, really, I—I was feeling pretty rotten, you know, and I didn't have mum-much heart for practice."

"Yes," said the captain, "I'm afraid that was the principal trouble—you didn't have much heart for it. You lost heart in the game, and you haven't braced up yet. I hardly thought it of you, Phil; I didn't expect you to play the baby."

"The baby!" exclaimed Springer resentfully.

"Yes; that's just what you've been doing. I made up my mind to speak plainly to you, and I'm going to do so—for your own good. You've been sulking, old fellow. It doesn't pay, Phil; you're hurting yourself far more than any one else."

"I don't think you've got any right to call it sulking," objected Springer in a low tone. "I own up that I did feel bad about the way things went in that gug-game; but I caught a cold, and

I decided to take care of myself in order to get back into my best condition."

"Is that the reason why you've been giving Rod Grant the cold shoulder?"

"I haven't been giving him—— What has he said to you, Eliot? Has he been tut-tut-talking about me?"

"Not a word."

"Then why should you say I'd given him the cold shoulder?"

"It was apparent to the dullest, Phil. For some time before that game you and Grant were very chummy; you were nearly always together, so that everybody noticed it. Since the game you've not been together at all, and I, myself, have plainly observed your efforts to avoid him. Now, old man, there can only be one explanation for such conduct: you're sore—sore because he succeeded in holding Barville down after you had failed."

Weakly Springer sought to protest against this, but stopped in the midst of it, fully comprehending how feeble his words were.

"It's folly, Springer," said Eliot, "sheer child-

ish folly. We were all sorry to see you get your bumps and lose control, and I don't believe any one was any sorrier than Grant himself; for, somehow, I've come firmly to believe that he's on the square. He was reluctant about going on to the slab when I called him."

"Perhaps that was because he was afraid he'd get his, too," muttered Springer.

"Now, that isn't generous, and you know it. If the score had been heavy against us at the time, some fellows might have fancied Grant's reluctance was prompted by fear and a disinclination to shoulder another man's load in the first game he pitched. I've not sized it up as anything of the sort. You and he were close friends, and, knowing how you must feel to be batted out, he was loath to go in. You must realize it was a mighty lucky thing for us that we had a pitcher to take your place. Barville had you going, Phil, and you couldn't seem to steady down. Even old stagers get into that condition sometimes when pitching, and it's not an infrequent occurrence that a slabman who is not thought so good steps in and stops the slaughter."

"Every-bub-body seems to think Grant is pretty good," mumbled Springer.

"He certainly did amazingly well, for which he generously gave you all the credit."

"I suppose he'll be the whole shooting match, now."

"Those words betray you, my boy. You've been trapped by the green-eyed monster. Come, come, Phil, you're too manly for that." He put out a hand and rested it on Springer's shoulder.

The color mounted into Phil's cheeks and slowly receded, leaving him pale, and still with downcast eyes. Eliot went on, steadily and earnestly:

"We need two pitchers—we must have them if we hope to make a decent showing in the series. By and by we'll have to play two games a week, and some of those games come so close together that one pitcher alone, unless he has an arm of iron, can't do all the flinging. You've been wonderfully successful in coaching Grant, and all the time you were training him to relieve you in a measure when the hardest work should come. Nobody wants to rob you of any credit; every

one says you've done a mighty good turn with him. But if you continue to sulk, as you have for the past few days, you'll lose the sympathy of your teammates; but you won't hurt Grant—otherwise than his feelings."

"I don't believe it would hurt his feelings a great deal."

Roger was vexed, but he continued to maintain his calm manner. "You ought to know him better than any one else around here; you ought to know whether he's at all sensitive or not. I'll tell you honestly, if I were in his place to-day, I'd feel it. Now, I'm your friend, old fellow, and I want you to listen to me and take my advice. Forget it. Get out for practice, treat Grant the same as before, and make up your mind you'll do your level best to redeem yourself in the next game you pitch. You'll have plenty of chances to show the stuff you're made of."

"I don't suppose the fellows have much confidence in me now."

"Nonsense! Unless they're chumps, they know every pitcher has his off days. There'll be a practice game to-night; we'll play against a

picked up scrub team. Now, I want to see you at the field in a suit and ready to do your part."

"All right," agreed Phil.

But later, conscience-stricken and ashamed, he could not bring himself to seek Rodney Grant and own up manfully to his silly behavior. And Grant, having begun to feel piqued, made no further advances.

At noon that day Roy Hooker returned to school, bringing a written excuse from his mother. Having a chance to speak privately with Springer, he said:

"I hear Eliot has expressed his estimation of you and Rod Grant."

Phil started. "You can hear lots of things," he retorted sharply.

"The fellows have been talking about it," returned Roy. "They say Eliot has said Grant will make a better pitcher than you, because you lack heart."

It was a blow below the belt, and, in spite of himself, Phil could not help showing the effect.

"He's welcome to th-think what he chooses," he exclaimed hotly; "it doesn't disturb me."

Nevertheless, he was so much disturbed that, in spite of his promise to Roger, he was not with the team when it took the field that night for the practice game. For he himself had vainly sought to put aside the depressing and unnerving conviction that in steadiness, stamina and self-confidence, Rodney Grant was his superior; something he had determined never to breathe to any one else, but which the keen judgment of the team captain had found out.

Nevertheless, when he reached home by a roundabout course, and found it impossible to dismiss thoughts of the boys engaged in that practice game, he eventually decided that he was a fool. Having reached this conclusion, he set off in great haste for the gymnasium, running the greater part of the distance.

Drawing near the gym, he could hear the boys engaged in the game beyond the high board fence. It did not take him long to shed his outer clothes and get into a baseball suit.

The game was in the second inning, with the regular team at bat and Hooker pitching for the scrub, which was made up partly of grammar

school boys. Everybody seemed to be watching Roy, and Phil walked on to the field and toward one of the benches without attracting attention.

"Look at Hook!" whooped Chipper Cooper. "He's actually trying to strike Roger out!"

Eliot was at bat, and the umpire had just called the second strike on him. There were no runners on the sacks.

"He struck aout Tut in t'other innin'," drawled Sile Crane. "I guess that's got him puffed up some."

Apparently not at all discomposed by these remarks, Hooker continued steadily about his business, and presently, rousing a shout of surprise, he succeeded in fanning the captain of the nine. Roger stepped back from the plate, after striking out, and stood there gazing at Roy, with one of his strange, rare smiles.

Crane followed. "Dinged if I wouldn't like ter see him fan me!" he said.

A moment later Hooker pulled him handsomely on a wide one, and the first strike was called, Cooper being again awakened to a wondering, whooping state of merriment.

"Look out! look out!" shouted the little fellow. "He'll get you if you don't. Who said Hooky couldn't pitch? There's more pitch in him than you can find in a big chew of spruce gum."

Crane, setting his teeth, made two fouls, and then sent Chipper into real convulsions by whiffing at a high one which Roy whistled across his shoulders with surprising accuracy.

"You wanted to see it," yelled Cooper. "You got a look, all right. Oh, say! Where did this new Christy Mathewson come from, anyhow? Look out for him, Roddy, or he'll add you to his list. List' to my warning."

Rodney Grant did not strike out, but, nevertheless, he failed to meet one of Hooker's shoots squarely, and the grammar school shortstop gathered in an easy grounder and threw to first for the third put-out.

Roger Eliot lingered to speak a word to Hooker, and Springer, still unnoticed, plainly heard what he said.

"Perhaps we've made a mistake in sizing you up, Roy, old fellow. It's your work alone that has prevented us from scoring in either of these

innings. You've always had speed and curves, but now you seem able to get the pill over. Keep it up, old fellow, and you'll make a pitcher yet. We may need you before the season ends."

CHAPTER XVI.

DREAD.

"There's Phil," cried Grant, spying him. "I'll take the field. Let him pitch."

Eliot turned, saw Springer, and looked relieved.

"Wondered where you were," he said pleasantly. "I see you're ready for business. This is a five-inning game, and Grant has pitched two innings already; you can hand 'em up the last three."

"But I haven't warmed up any," said Phil. "I couldn't get around any sooner."

"There's no hurry," returned Roger. "You can have plenty of time to limber your wing; the scrub won't object to that."

"But I don't want to butt in and take Grant's place."

"Shucks!" cried Rod genially. "Who's butting in, anyhow? What are you talking about, part-

ner? I want to get some field practice anyhow, and perhaps I will if you're kind enough to let the scrub hit you once in a while. They're putting up a right smart sort of a game, but Hooker's mainly responsible, as he hasn't been letting us rap him to any great extent. No scores yet on either side."

"Come on, Phil," called Eliot decisively, as he slipped his left hand into the big catching mitt, "get out there and wiggle your flinger. Tuttle, maybe they'll let you play with the scrub, so Grant can occupy the right-hand pasture."

This arrangement was quickly made, the captain of the scrub team having filled his outfield positions with youngsters who were even weaker than Tuttle. Springer accepted the ball tossed to him, and walked out to the pitcher's box, where he began warming up by throwing to Eliot, while the scrub batters waited around their bench. He was not in the most agreeable frame of mind, but he had no fear of the scrub players. In a few moments he announced that he was ready, and began work with the determination of striking out the first fellow who faced him. Ordi-

narily, this would not have been such a difficult thing to do, but, through some unusual freak of chance, the batter, swinging blindly, succeeded in hitting out a most annoying little Texas leaguer that sailed just beyond the eagerly reaching fingers of Jack Nelson.

"Come, Spring, old wiz," cried the thoughtless Cooper, "you've got to do better than that. If you don't, we'll have to put Grant back on the slab to avert the disgrace of being beaten by this bunch of kid pick-ups."

A sudden gust of anger caused Springer to glare, speechless, at the annoying shortstop; and he was so much disturbed that, in spite of all he could do, the next batter, "waiting it out," was rewarded for his patience by a pass. Within a few moments both these runners advanced on a long fly to the outfield, dropped by Stone after a hard run.

Springer forced a laugh. "Can't expect to hold the kids dud-down with that sort of support," he cried.

He did strike the following hitter out; and then came Hooker, who found a bender and straight-

ened it for a sizzling two-bagger that sent in both runners.

Springer longed to quit at this juncture, but, being ashamed to do so, he relaxed his efforts and pitched indifferently, permitting the two following scrubmen to hit the ball. It chanced, however, that neither of these fellows hit safely, both perishing in a desperate sprint for the initial sack.

Rodney Grant, jogging in from the field, seated himself beside Springer on the bench.

"You were a little out of form that inning, son," he said; "but you'll be all right next trip, I opine."

Without replying, Springer got up and began pawing over the bats, as if searching among them for some special favorite.

Hooker again pitched very well, indeed, but poor support gave the regulars a score, and they would have obtained more had not Roy risen to the occasion, with one down and the bases full, and struck two hitters out.

Although Phil showed some improvement in the fourth inning, and the scrub team did not

succeed in securing another tally, he felt all the while that his teammates were watching him closely and comparing or contrasting his work with that of Hooker; nor did he forget that in the first two innings Grant had performed more successfully.

To the surprise of many, fumbles and bad throws behind Hooker in the fourth did not seem to discourage him, and he persisted in pitching as if the game was one of some importance and he had resolved to do his part, no matter what happened. The errors gave the regular team three runs and the lead, and it was Hooker's work alone that kept them from obtaining several more.

In the fifth and last, Phil whipped the ball over spitefully, and only one batter hit it safely. Nevertheless, with the contest ended and the fellows trooping toward the gymnasium, he noticed that no one had any word of praise for him, while several expressed their surprise over the showing Hooker had made. Even Grant, whose friendly advance had been met with churlish spleen, commended Hooker. Phil felt as if the

very ground was slipping from beneath his feet, and it made him sore and sick at heart. He paid little attention to the talk of the fellows while dressing, until of a sudden the words of Nelson caught his ear.

"Of course, you fellows have heard all about that Clearport-Wyndham game? I had a talk to-day with a fellow who saw the whole of it. Cracky! Clearport did come near pulling it out of the fire—actually batted out a lead of one run in the first of the ninth. If Wyndham hadn't come back in her half and made two tallies, she'd been stung."

"I hear," said Berlin Barker, "that Clearport pounded Wyndham's wonderful new twirler off the slab."

"That's right," said Nelson. "They got at Newbert in the seventh and gave him fits. The score was eight to two in favor of Wyndham when the 'Porters began connecting with Newbert's twists, and they hammered in three earned runs before the shift was made. Twitt Crowell was sent in to save the day, but if he hadn't had

luck, they'd kept right on. It was his backing that checked the stampede."

"The Clearporters always have been heavy batters," said Eliot. "If they could play the rest of the game the way they bat, they'd be almost sure to win the championship."

"The fellow we put up against them for Saturday will have to have his nerve with him," grinned Cooper. "If he weakens, they'll murder him."

"Crowell got through the eighth all right," continued Nelson; "but in the first of the ninth the 'Porters found him and bingled out four runs. It looked as if they had the game tucked away; but Wyndham rose to the emergency in the last half and got two, which let them out with a victory."

"If Clearport can play like that away from home," observed Sleuth Piper, "my deduction is that she will be a terror to beat on her own field."

Springer, dressed, stowed his playing clothes in a locker and walked out of the gymnasium unnoticed. This was the first time he had heard

the particulars concerning that game, although on Saturday the surprising information had been telephoned to Oakdale that Wyndham had been barely able to squeeze out a precarious victory on her own grounds. As Eliot had stated, the Clearporters were batters to be feared, and Phil was now in no condition to be unruffled by this menace to his prowess.

Once more Springer sulked; not until Friday night did he again show himself for practice. Eliot, thoroughly disgusted, and realizing that it was the worst sort of policy to coax such a fellow, let him alone. He was given a chance to warm up and do a little pitching to the batters, but, following Eliot's example, no one tried to coddle him.

"Everybody be on time for the train to-morrow," urged Roger, as they were dressing. "Trains won't wait for people who are late."

But even when he went to bed that night Springer was undecided as to whether he would be on hand or not. Had he been urged, it is doubtful if he would have appeared; but, perceiving, in spite of his dudgeon, that he could

gain nothing by remaining away, he arrived at the station just in time to board the train with his comrades.

The day was disagreeable, rain threatening, and, deep in his heart, Springer hoped it would pour all the afternoon. The menacing storm holding off, however, at the appointed hour the two teams were on the field ready for the clash.

Phil, still agitated by poorly hidden alarm, could not fail to observe the all too evident confidence of the Clearport players. The local crowd was likewise confident, something indicated by their encouragement of and cheering for their players.

"If I'm batted out to-day it's my finish," thought the unhappy Oakdale pitcher.

"Cheer up," said a Clearporter, trotting past him. "We won't do a thing to you. If you're sick and need some medicine, we'll hand you some of the same kind we gave Newbert and Crowell."

"Aw, go on!" growled Phil. "You're nothing but a lot of wind-bags."

While the locals were practicing Eliot called Grant and Springer aside, giving each a ball.

"Warm up, both of you," he directed. "I'll catch you."

So these rivals, who had only a short time before been friends, stood off at the proper distance and pitched alternately to Eliot. Grant was steady and serene, with good control and in command of some curves, of which the drop taught him by Springer led Roger to nod his head approvingly; seeing which, Phil, who had not been right to start with, grew very wild indeed.

Practice over, the Clearport captain trotted up to Roger, saying:

"We're all ready. We'll take the field. Let's get to playing before it begins raining."

Phil sat down on the bench, throwing his sweater over his arm for protection. The umpire called, "Play," and Nelson, cheered by the little crowd from Oakdale, stepped out with his bat.

The Oakdale captain found a place at Springer's side. "Phil," he said in a low tone, "I want you to be ready to go in any time. I've decided to start the game with Grant, but we may need you any moment."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BOY ON THE BENCH.

For a moment Phil was dazed; then a sudden feeling of relief flashed over him. He would not have to face those dangerous Clearport batters unless Grant should be knocked out, in which case, no matter what happened after he went in, all the blame could be thrust upon Rodney.

But this feeling of satisfaction lasted only a few seconds; gradually resentment and wrath crowded it out, and he sat there eaten by the bitterest emotion. Not for a moment had he dreamed Eliot would think of starting the game with the Texan on the slab, for this day he, Phil, was to be given the opportunity to redeem himself. It was an outrage, an injustice of such magnitude that his soul flamed with wrath. What if Grant were to succeed in holding the Clearporters down? In that case, of course,

Eliot would permit him to pitch the game through to the finish, leaving on the bench the lad who had expected to do the twirling. And that would mean further glory for the chap Springer had thoughtlessly coached for the position of second pitcher; would mean that, if he pitched at all in future games, Phil himself would be the second string man.

Feeling that he could not contain himself, he was turning to Eliot when, to his amazement, he saw the fellows rising from the bench and starting toward the field; for while he had been thus bitterly absorbed the first three Oakdalers had faced Oakes, the Clearport pitcher, and not one of them had reached first base. Phil could scarcely believe it possible that the riotous condition of his mind had prevented him from realizing that the game was in progress, but such had been the case.

And now, hot and cold by turns, he saw Rod Grant fling aside his brand-new crimson sweater and jog forth, smiling, to pit his skill and brains against the local sluggers.

"I hate him!" hissed the miserable lad beneath

his breath. "I hope they pound him to death right off the reel."

A few moments later his heart gave a tremendous leap of joy, and he almost shouted with satisfaction when Boothby led off by smashing the first ball Grant handed up. It was a terrific long line drive to center field, but Stone took the ball on the run, and the Clearport sympathizers groaned and cried, "Hard luck!"

"It *was* hard luck for Boothby," muttered Springer. "If he'd placed that drive farther to the left it would have been good for three sus-sacks. It was a fearful slam. Oh, they'll hand it to Mr. Grant, all right!"

The next batter, Long, likewise hit the ball, driving it buzzing along the ground, and again the crowd groaned; for Nelson made a hair-raising, one-hand, diving jab and got the sphere. He nearly sprawled at full length upon the ground in doing this, but finally regained his equilibrium in time to toss the ball to Crane for the second put-out.

"Right fine work, Jack," praised Grant. "That was just about as fancy as anything I ever saw."

"It was a fuf-fine thing for *you,* all right," whispered Springer to himself. "Robbed Long of a hit. Oh, they're going to hand you yours!"

"You're playing ball to-day, fellows," smiled Eliot, readjusting the catching mask. "That's the stuff!"

Barney Carney, Clearport's lively young Irishman, danced forth with a bat.

"Just be after letting me put me shillaly against one of them," he chuckled. "Ye'll find it over in the woods yonder."

After making three fouls, he hit the ball, hoisting it so high into the air that it seemed to dwindle to a quarter of its usual size. Cooper, coming into the diamond, gave no heed to the shouting of the crowd. "I'll take it!" he yelled, as the ball fell swiftly. And take it he did, freezing to the horsehide with a grip like grim death.

"You're wearing horseshoes all over you to-day, Mr. Grant," growled the watching lad on the bench. "But there'll come a change; this can't keep up."

It was impossible for him to wear a pleasant face as his teammates gathered about him, even

though he tried, in a measure, to hide his chagrin. Silently he watched Stone lead off with a safety, and saw Eliot unhesitatingly sacrifice Ben to second. Nor did he move a muscle when Sile Crane slashed one into right field and Stone won the approval of his comrades and awakened the enthusiasm of the little crowd of Oakdale rooters by making a marvelous sprint over third and a slide to the plate that brought him to the rubber ahead of the ball.

Oakes, taking a brace, disposed of Cooper and Piper in double-quick time; and the visitors were forced to remain content with a single tally in the second.

Clearport again came to bat in a business-like manner, and in almost every detail the home team duplicated the performance of Oakdale. Butters, picking out a bender to his fancy, straightened it for a single.

"Good bub-boy!" mumbled Springer.

Stoker bunted, letting Butters down to second while he was being thrown out at first. Merwin got a Texas leaguer, on which Butters took a chance—foolishly, it seemed—and was saved by

a wild throw to the pan that let him slide under the catcher.

"Now, Mr. Grant is getting his mum-medicine," grinned Springer joyfully.

But Grant, resorting to his wonderful drop, struck out both Ramsdell and Oakes. "That's the form, Grant!" approved Eliot; and Springer chewed his tongue with envy.

The third inning gave neither side the advantage, but Grant seemed to be swinging into shape; for, of the four hitters to face him, he retired three with an ease that made them look foolish.

Rain was now threatening any moment, and it seemed hardly probable that the downpour would hold off long enough for the game to be played through. "We must get into it as soon as we can, fellows," said Captain Eliot; "for if it does rain after the fifth inning, we should have the lead. Come on; take that pitcher's measure."

Whether or not his words had an effect, they proceeded to go after Oakes in a manner that might have discouraged any pitcher. Eliot, himhelf, started it with a screaming two-bagger, scoring on Crane's single. Sile took second on

the throw to the plate, and stole third a moment later, romping to the pan after Cooper's fly to the outfield was caught.

With the sacks clean, Oakes' comrades were hopeful that he would check the enemy. It was not his fault that Piper reached first, as Hutt, at third, fumbled the grounder batted at him and followed this with a wretched throw. This seemed to put the home pitcher off his feet, for he passed Tuttle, to the great joy of the visitors.

"Great Cæsar!" muttered Springer. "If they get a big lead, Grant may pitch it through and win. Why doesn't Merwin take Oakes out?"

But Oakes remained on the slab, and Nelson, seeking to drive the ball through an infield opening, batted straight at Carney, who winged the sphere across for a put-out.

"Only one more," said Merwin encouragingly. "Get Barker, Oakesie."

"If you don't get him, your goose is cooked—and mine, too!" whispered Springer.

Barker stood second on the list because he was a good waiter, but could hit well if necessary, and was, perhaps, the best bunter and sacrifice

batter Oakdale had. With two down, he surprised the Clearporters by dropping a soggy one in front of the pan and beating it to first.

The corners were filled, and, "Here's Grant!" was the cry. Phil Springer's teeth chattered and his eyes almost glared as the Texan, with whom he had been on such friendly terms only a short time before, stepped out to face Oakes.

"If he'll only strike out!" thought Phil.

When Rod had swung at two balls, and missed both, it began to seem that he was destined to strike out. A few seconds later, however, he caught the ball fairly on the trade mark and drove it over the head of Carney, who made an amusingly ineffective leap for it.

Three runners chased one another over the pan, and Grant arrived at third base before the ball was returned to the diamond.

Springer was ill; at that moment, he thought, he would have given almost anything to be far from that field. It was all Grant, Grant, and never had he heard a more hateful sound than the shrill and frantic cheering of the small Oakdale crowd.

"Keep it up! keep it going!" entreated Eliot, as Stone went to bat.

Ben did his best, and he did pound out a long fly, but Boothby, in left, pulled it down after a hard run.

"The game is as gug-good as settled," muttered Springer, when his elated teammates had galloped off to the field and left him alone. "Unless rain stops it, Oakdale is the winner."

The Clearporters seemed to realize this, for they resorted to many obvious expedients to delay the game, casting imploring eyes toward the threatening heavens. The storm, however, perversely held off, and the locals found Grant too much for them in the last of the fourth.

"We're five runs to the good, fellows," said Eliot, as the Oakdale players gathered at the bench. "It's going to rain soon, and this inning must be played through complete. Let every man who goes to bat now strike out."

They followed instructions, Roger setting the example. Crane and Cooper made a pretense of trying to hit, but they did not even foul the ball.

A few straggling drops of rain, falling in

the last of the inning, encouraged Clearport to dally until Eliot demanded of the umpire that he compel them to play or give the game to Oakdale by forfeit, and at last Grant struck out the third man.

While the boys were rejoicing in a victory they considered as positively assured, Phil Springer slipped away and left the field.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LOST OPPORTUNITY.

But the game was not to end there, for, although it continued to sprinkle slightly at intervals, not enough rain fell to lead the umpire into calling time. The playing continued, with both teams fighting hard and wasting no opportunities after the conclusion of the fifth inning.

Unaware of this, Springer, who had noted that by hurrying he might possibly be able to catch the mid-afternoon train for the west, ran all the way to the hotel, where a room had been provided for the use of the visitors in changing their clothes, tore off his baseball suit, yanked on his regular garments, and arrived, panting, at the station just in time to swing onto the last car as the train was pulling out.

By this foolish action Phil lost a golden opportunity to put himself "right" with his teammates.

For in the eighth inning, with the score 7 to 2 in favor of the visitors, Clearport seemed at last to take Rodney Grant's measure, and, aided by errors on the part of Oakdale, they went after him with a fierceness that threatened to drive him off the slab. Eliot, becoming alarmed, looked round for Springer, desiring him to warm up and make ready.

All along the Oakdale captain had supposed Phil to be somewhere near at hand, but now not a trace of him was to be discovered. Making an excuse to do something to the catching mask, Eliot ran to the bench and called Bunk Lander, who was watching the game from a position near by.

"Lander," said Roger swiftly, as he fussed with the mask, "where is Springer? We need him—bad."

"I gotter idea," said Bunk, "that he's skipped. Saw him go out through the gate in a mighty hurry at the end of the fifth."

"Skipped!" muttered Roger, paying no heed to the demands of the Clearport crowd that he should play ball. "It can't be possible that he—— Say, Lander, find Roy Hooker, quick. Tell him

I want him on the bench. If he's loyal to his school he'll come. I'll set him to warming up, anyhow."

Bunk went searching for Hooker, and discovered him at the far end of the right-field bleachers, talking with Herbert Rackliff.

"Hey, you, Hook!" called Lander. "Roge Eliot wants you to warm up, for it looks like they're going to knock Grant into a cocked hat. They got him goin' somethin' fierce. You gotter save this game for us—if you can."

Hooker's face flushed and he caught his breath. Was it possible he was to have an opportunity to pitch in that game? Eagerly he started, but Rackliff's stained fingers gripped his coatsleeve.

"Are you going to be an easy mark?" asked Herbert scornfully. "Are you going to let them run you in after a game is lost by another pitcher? Have you forgotten the sort of rotten, shabby treatment you've had to stand by this very bunch that wants to put you up for sacrifice now?"

Roy hesitated.

"Look here, you pale-faced, sneaky, cigarette-suckin' pup," rasped Bunk furiously, "you take your claws off his arm and let him alone, or I'll grasp the occasion to hand you the dose of medicine I come so nigh givin' ye at the game last Satterday. Mebbe he can save this game, and it's up to him to try, anyhow. I s'pose you've bet some more money ag'inst your own school team, and want to see it beat. Somebody's goin' to give you all that's coming some day pretty soon. Come on quick, Hook."

Roy did not permit Herbert to detain him longer, but he heard and understood some words which were hastily whispered into his ear by the fellow as he was starting away.

Meanwhile Grant had pulled himself together at last, despite the howling of the Clearport crowd, and, with the bases full and the enemy only one tally behind, he struck out two men, bringing the rally to an end.

Rod's face wore an unusually serious expression as he walked to the bench, at one end of which Eliot stood unbuckling the body-protector.

"That sure was a right rotten exhibition of

pitching," said the Texan humbly. "Why didn't you yank me out, captain?"

"Because," answered Roger, "there was no one else to put in."

"Why, Phil——"

"Has disappeared; can't find hide nor hair of him. I sent for Roy Hooker as a last resort and —here he is!"

Roy came up, his face flushed. Eliot spoke to him quietly in a low tone:

"Springer has deserted us," he said. "If I'd had you on the bench and ready, I'd surely sent you onto the firing line to relieve Grant. Get somebody to catch you and limber your arm up. I may let you finish the game."

So Hooker peeled off and went at it warming up while Oakdale made a desperate but futile effort to gather some more tallies. While his players were striving to solve Oakes' delivery Captain Eliot had a brief talk with Grant.

"You were not wholly to blame for that streak, Rod," said Roger. "Those two bad errors helped things along; they sort of got your goat. You ended strong by mowing down Butters and

Stoker, and I think perhaps you can go back and finish it out."

"But you sent for Hooker. He's warming up now."

"I sent for Hooker as a last resort when you were performing at your worst. Just then I'd tried almost anybody in your place, hoping that the change might put an end to the slaughter; but now, unless you have lost your nerve——"

Rodney gave Roger a resentful look. "I reckon I've still got my nerve with me," he said warmly.

"Then I'm going to let you try to hold them. If they get another run the game will be tied, and two more runs gives them the victory. You've got to hold them right where they are."

"I certain will do my level best to hold them."

And so it happened that Hooker did not get the chance to pitch in that game, after all. Eliot explained to him that Grant was willing to try to pitch it through, but added that he should bench Rod instantly in case he betrayed any bad symptoms. The Texan, however, was cool as a cucumber and steady as a mountain, not even seem-

ing to hear the howling of the crowd, which resumed its uproar in an effort to put him off his feet again. Captain Merwin was the first victim, retiring by the strike-out route; and then Ramsdell hit weakly on the ground, being thrown out long ere he could sprint to first; the game ending 7 to 6 in Oakdale's favor when Eliot pulled down a high foul from Oakes' bat.

"I'm much obliged to you, Hooker, old chap," said Eliot cordially, after the cheering was over and the boys had started from the field. "It was fine and loyal of you to answer my call promptly, as you did; but as long as Rod still had his nerve I thought it best to let him try to finish it out. Come along with us. We've got to have two pitchers, and if Springer has taken a huff you'll likely get chances enough to do some twirling."

Although disappointed because he had not been permitted to pitch in the final inning of the present game, the prospect of possible opportunities in the future cheered Hooker, and he marched from the field with the other players, feeling almost as if he was one of them.

Roy was standing on the steps of the hotel, waiting for the boys to dress, when Herbert Rackliff approached at a languid saunter, smoking, as usual, and looking rather dejected and cast down.

"I say, Hook," said Herbert, "lend me the price of a ticket back to Oakdale, will you. I've gone clean broke over here, thanks to the rotten luck. You know I told you at the field that I'd bet my last red on Clearport. Why didn't Eliot put you in to pitch? If he had, you could have saved my money for me without——"

"Look here, Rack," interrupted Roy hotly, "if that's the kind of a chap you think I am you've got me sized up wrong. I know I gave you money once to bet against Oakdale, but I'd never throw a game for you or anybody else."

"Oh, well," sneered Herbert, "it isn't likely you'll have a chance. I notice Eliot didn't let you pitch, after all. He doesn't take any stock in you. Now don't get hot with me, for we're friends. If I'd bought a return ticket I'd be all right, but——"

"I'm going back on the train with the team,"

said Hooker. "Came over on my motorcycle. I'll let you have that. It will take you home all right."

Rackliff looked still more weary. "I detest the thing," he said. "Come, old chap——"

"I've got only money enough for my own fare," said Roy. "You'll find riding my motorcycle better than walking."

"That's right," sighed Herbert resignedly. "I'll take it."

CHAPTER XIX.

POISON SPLEEN.

Phil Springer returned to Oakdale in a wretched frame of mind. Barely had the train carried him out of Clearport before he began to regret his hasty action in running away, but it was then too late to turn back.

"I suppose some of the fellows will think it rotten of me to sneak," he muttered, "but the game was practically over, and there was no reason why I shouldn't get back home as soon as I could. Why should I hang round just for the pleasure of making the return trip with the rest of the bub-bunch and being forced to listen to their praise of Rod Grant for his fine work! They'll slobber over him, all right. He's the star now, and I—I who taught him everything he knows about pitching—I am the second string man! I won't be that! I won't be anything! I'm done!"

He was not a little surprised as he stepped off the train to find it was not raining, although the sky was still heavy and threatening, as if the downpour might come at any moment.

"It certainly is coming down in Clearport, just the same. It had begun before I hiked. Hiked! I hate that word; Grant uses it. Clearport is nineteen miles away, and it frequently rains there when it doesn't here."

He hurried over the bridge and up through the village toward his home.

"Hi, there, Phil!" cried a voice as he was passing the postoffice, and a wondering looking youngster came running out. "What are you doing here—at this hour? Saw you start for Clearport with the team, and——"

"Game's over," cut in Springer. "Rain sus-stopped it."

"Rain? Why——"

"Yes; it's raining over at the Port."

"Rotten! How many innings——"

"Five; just finished the fif-fifth when the clouds started to leak."

"Oh, then it counts as a game," palpitated the

interested boy. "How did the score stand? Who was ahead?"

"Oakdale, six to one," answered Springer over his shoulder as he hurried on up the street.

"Hooray!" came the elated shout of the rejoicing lad. "Then you trimmed 'em! Jinks! that's fine. But, say—say, who pitched?"

Springer quickened his stride, seemingly deaf of a sudden. He had felt the question coming, and he had no heart to answer it. It would be asked by every fellow in Oakdale who had not attended the game, and, on learning the truth, they would join in one grand chorus of acclamation and praise for the Texan. For the time being Grant would be the king pin of the town.

Reaching home, Phil slipped in quietly without being seen by his mother and tiptoed up to his room, where, in sour meditation, he spent the intervening time until supper was ready. In a vague way he realized that he had, by deserting the team, betrayed himself to all his comrades as a fellow swayed by petty jealousy; but this thought, which seemed trying to force itself humiliatingly upon him, he beat back and thrust

aside, persisting in dwelling on the notion that he had been most shabbily treated by Captain Eliot.

"He led me to believe he meant to give me a chance to-day, and then he let me warm the bench while Grant went out to win all the glory. It wasn't a square deal. I'll show him he can't treat me that way! I'll never pitch again as long as he is captain."

This resolution, however, gave him anything but a feeling of satisfaction; it was poor retaliation, indeed, for him, who loved the game so dearly and had looked forward so confidently to this season when he would be the star pitcher of the nine, to "get square" with Eliot by refusing to play at all. It would have seemed somewhat better had he felt certain that his withdrawal must seriously cripple the nine, but, judging by recent events, it appeared that Oakdale could get along very well without him—might, indeed, succeed fully as well as it could with him on the team.

Grant was to blame for it all. No, not Grant; he himself was to blame. Had he not been such a blind fool he might have foreseen what would

happen, for had not Rodney Grant displayed beyond doubt since appearing in Oakdale the natural qualifications of mind and body which would make him a leader at anything he might undertake with unbridled vim and enthusiasm? The fellow who had been so completely misjudged by almost everyone during his early days at the academy, had demonstrated later that he was a thoroughbred, with nerve, brains, courage and the will to step into the front ranks wherever he might be. His one great fault, a fiery and unreasoning temper, he was fighting hard to master, and in this, as in other things, he had already shown that he was destined to succeed.

"I was a Jack!" growled Phil, walking the floor of his room and savagely kicking an inoffensive chair out of his way. "I should have known. If I had taken Hooker in hand and coached him, instead of Grant—— But I never did like Roy very much, and somehow Rod Grant got on my sus-soft side."

His mother, hearing him prowling around, called up the stairs and was somewhat surprised to find him home.

At supper he tried to hide the disturbed state of his mind, but his father, who seldom took any interest at all in such matters unexpectedly attempted to joke him a bit.

"Got beat to-day, I see," said Mr. Springer. "Did you up pretty bad, didn't they?"

"How did you get that idea?" asked Phil evasively.

"Oh, I can tell by the way you act. You're broke up, though you're making a bluff not to show it. Let's see, played Clearport, didn't ye? I s'pose they give you an awful hammering? Oakdale'll have to get another pitcher after this."

"They didn't beat us; we won."

"Whew! Is that a fact? Well, what's the matter with you, then? I thought by your looks that you'd been done up brown. What went wrong with the game, anyhow? Didn't you get good backing up?"

"I didn't pitch."

"So *that's* it, eh? How did it happen? The way you've been blowing around the house every time you could get anybody to listen, I thought

you were the whole thing in that particular department."

Phil's cheeks burned and his hands shook nervously, although he fought hard to appear unconcerned and indifferent. In replying the slight impediment in his speech became more pronounced.

"The gug-game only went fuf-five innings; it commenced to rur-rain then, so they didn't finish it out. You see I—I cuc-can't do all the pitching, and Eliot put in Grant for the first pup-part of this game." He was intensely annoyed because of his unusual halting and stammering over this explanation.

"Humph! Rained, eh? That was odd; just began to rain here about half an hour ago."

"It began to pour at Clearport right in the middle of the game," declared Phil. "I was just ready to relieve Grant, for he—he was sort of —sort of sus-showing signs of weakening. Eliot had sus-started me to warming up, but it—it began to rain, and that sus-settled it."

His wounded pride, his wretched jealousy of Grant, had led him into the telling of an untruth,

and he left the table feeling very contemptible indeed. Certainly it was not a malicious falsehood that was liable to do any one particular harm, but it was a falsehood just the same, and he was ashamed.

His room was like a cage, and he found he could not read or study. What were they saying about the game in town? What were they saying about the pitching of Rodney Grant? Despite the rain, some of the fellows would gather after supper at the postoffice or Stickney's store to talk it over. This talk after a victorious game had ever held a keen delight for Phil, and it was rarely that he missed being on hand to take part in it.

"I must get out!" he cried suddenly. "I'll just wander down street; maybe I'll meet some fellow who won't be all done up in Grant."

Putting on an old raincoat and securing an umbrella, he left the house and started down the street. At the first corner he paused, for if he continued straight down Main Street he would have to pass Roger Eliot's home, and surely he had no desire by any chance to run upon Roger.

A drizzling rain was falling, and twilight was coming on. Turning, he cut through Cedar Street and down Willow to avoid passing Urian Eliot's fine house.

On his way he passed a house no less pretentious than that of the Eliots; it was the home of Lemuel Hayden, whose only son, Bernard, had been compelled to leave Oakdale because of his jealous efforts and lying and plotting to injure Ben Stone, whom he bitterly hated. The boys of the town had talked that matter over many times, and it was universally conceded that Bernard's unrestrained hatred of Stone and plotting for the boy's injury had led him at last into a pit of his own digging and brought upon him nothing more than just retribution.

A strange and most unpleasant thought struck in upon Springer: in almost every particular, save a deliberate underhand effort to injure Grant, he was not a whit better than Bern Hayden, who now had not a single boy friend left in Oakdale.

That thought staggered Phil a bit. Why, in a vague way he had contemplated seeking some

surreptitious method of accomplishing the overthrow of Grant!

"Oh, I guess I'm rotten!" he growled. "But it's dirty luck that's made me so!"

CHAPTER XX.

FELLOWS WHO MADE MISTAKES.

Roy Hooker lived one block further down the street. The popping explosions of an approaching motorcycle greeted Phil's ears as he walked on, and up the street came a chap astride such a machine, the lamp of which had not yet been lighted. The motorcycle swerved into Hooker's yard and nearly ran Springer down.

"Hey!" cried Phil, dodging. "What are you trying to do, Hooker?"

But it was not Hooker who shut off the motor and tumbled off the machine as it slackened speed. It was Herbert Rackliff, soaked, mud-bespattered, limp and in a temper.

"Why in the dickens don't you get out of a fellow's way?" snapped Herbert, supporting the machine and glaring round at Phil. He bore little resemblance to the usual dapper, immacu-

late, self-possessed young fellow from the city whose tailored clothes and swagger manners had aroused the envy and admiration of a number of country lads thereabouts.

"Oh, is it you?" said Springer. "I thought it was Hooker. What are you doing out in this rain with his machine?"

"Just getting back from Clearport," answered Herbert, with a sour laugh. "If I owned this old mess of junk I'd pay somebody to take it away. She stopped twice on me and skidded me into the ditch once. Came mighty near leaving her there and hoofing it."

In truth, Rackliff was a sight, and Springer restrained a laugh with some difficulty as he observed:

"It must have taken you a deuce of a while to get back on that thing, for the game was over by three o'clock."

"Half past three," corrected Herbert, turning to trundle the motorcycle toward the carriage house, the door of which, seen through the twilight, was standing open.

"I caught the three-twelve train from Clear-

port," said Phil, unconsciously starting to follow Rackliff.

"Huh!" grunted the other. "Know you did, but you didn't wait to see the finish. If you had——"

By this time Springer was at the speaker's side and had seized his mud-spattered, rain-soaked sleeve.

"What are you talking about?" he cried. "Rain stopped the game right after the fifth. Saw I had barely time to get into my togs and catch that three-twelve, so I hustled."

Rackliff started to laugh, but finished with a hollow cough. "Bet I've caught a rotten cold," he gasped. "The game went for the full nine innings. Didn't begin to rain until I was pretty near halfway home."

Phil was struck dumb for the moment, and before he could recover Hooker, having heard their voices, came running out to the carriage house, calling to Rackliff. Springer followed the drenched and complaining city youth into the shelter of the building, where Roy recognized him and seemed to betray embarrassment.

"Take your old machine," said Rackliff, "and I hope it may be my everlasting finish if I ever ride another rod on it. Look at me! I'm a complete wreck, and all because you were too blamed stingy to lend me the price of carfare from Clearport. This suit is ruined, and I'm soaked to the bone. You ought to use an axe on the thing next time it gets out of order, Hooker."

"And these are the thanks I get for furnishing some means of transportation," said Roy resentfully. "Well, I don't know that I should expect anything else."

Herbert, producing his cigarette case, gave a little half-muttered sigh of relief when he found that the contents of the case had escaped a wetting.

"Gimme a match, one of you fellows," he coughed. "I'm just crazy for a smoke. This has been the rottenest day I've seen in a long time."

Hooker, having seen that the motorcycle was placed on its rack, supplied the match, and Rackliff fired up, the light seeming to shine through his thin, cupped hands as he protected the blaze from the light draught that came in through

the open door. He looked tired, and the first whiff or two set him coughing again.

By this time Springer had recovered, and he ventured to ask:

"What's this Rackliff tells me about the gug-game going nine innings? It began to rain in the fifth and, wishing to get home as soon as I could, I ducked when that was over. I didn't have an idea——"

"It didn't rain any to speak of until long after the full game was over," said Hooker. "You should have stayed, Phil; they wanted you—bad—in the eighth. Eliot was simply tearing things up in his frenzy to find you."

"Why—why, what happened?" faltered Springer, a sickening feeling stealing over him. "Tut-tell me what ha-happened, Roy."

"The Porters got after Grant and bumped him to beat the band. Came within one tally of tying the score. If you'd been there Eliot would have shoved you in, and you'd had a chance to win all sorts of glory saving the game."

"Perhaps he would, and perhaps he wouldn't," muttered Phil.

"Oh, it's a dead sure thing he would have done it."

"How do you know?"

"Didn't I tell you he tried to find you! Why, he even sent for me; he was going to put me in."

"You?" breathed Springer incredulously.

"Yes, me; and I didn't have on a playing suit. If Grant hadn't managed to steady down at the last moment, I'd gone onto the slab. What made you skin out, Phil?"

After a few moments of silence, Springer forced himself by a great effort to speak:

"I tut-told you I thought the game was o-over."

"You might have waited for the rest of the bunch. If you'd done that you'd known it wasn't over. The fellows are pretty sore on you, for they say you deserted."

Phil flushed and flared. "Let them be sore, I don't care! I'm the one to be sore! I got a rotten deal to-day. I had every reason to suppose I was going to pitch that game, but Roger Eliot ran Grant in. I want him to understand he

can't play that sort of fuf-funny business with me; I won't sus-stand for it. I'm glad they hammered Grant! Did they win?"

"No; *we* pulled through by the skin of our teeth—seven to six. It was an awful snug rub. I believe I could have stopped the Porters if I'd got the chance; I'm dead sure you could. That's why I say you made a big mistake by scooting."

Herbert Rackliff, smoking, laughed sneeringly.

"Don't blame Springer a bit," he said. "He did get a rotten deal, and he has a right to resent it. What ails you, Hook; are you going to let Eliot softsoap round you? He'll do it if you'll let him, for he's got to have some sort of a scrub pitcher to fall back on for part of the work. Of course, this wild and woolly Texan will be the star and get all the glory, but somebody must do the dirty work. Hook, you're a lobster. I didn't think you'd fall for taffy like that. You give me a cramp." He coughed behind a thin hand as he finished, his flat chest torn and his stooping shoulders shaken by the effort.

"Now that will about do for you!" blazed

Roy, turning on his erstwhile chum. "I want you to know that, at least, I'm no traitor to my school team, and, though you hinted for me to favor you to-day, I'd done my level best to win for Oakdale if I'd ever got the chance."

"You're a fool," returned Herbert coldly. "Springer is a fool, too. He made a chump of himself when he taught Grant to pitch. In this world the fellow who looks out for himself and lets others do the same for themselves is the one who gets along. You can bank on that every time. Think it over and see if I'm not right. Good night." With which expression of selfish wisdom, he turned up his coat collar, snapped aside his half-smoked cigarette and took his departure, leaving Phil and Roy staring at each other in uncomfortable silence.

After a time Springer succeeded in forcing a laugh.

"That's just about what you told me a few days ago, Hook," he said, "but I really didn't need anyone to point out that I had made a fool of myself. Sorry I didn't wait to make sure rain was going to stop the game to-day. What makes

it worse, I told my folks a lie about that game. I'll feel cheap enough when they fuf-find out the truth. Guess I'll be going, too. So long, Hook."

"Good night," said Roy.

He stood at the open door and watched Phil's figure disappear into the gloom of the rainy night that was coming on.

"Told your folks a lie, did you?" he muttered after a time. "Well, that wasn't half as bad as stealing from them, and I——" Without finishing the sentence, he closed the door of the carriage house.

CHAPTER XXI.

A PERSISTENT RASCAL.

Nearly always it is false pride that spurs on the naturally decent fellow who realizes he has made a mistake and knows deep down in his heart that the course he is pursuing is wrong. Thus it was with Phil Springer. Time and again his conscience condemned him and his judgment bade him come forth like a man and own up to his error, but his pride would not let him yield.

And so Phil found himself sulking at school, seeking to bear the atmosphere of one who had been treated outrageously, and growing more and more resentful and sullen as time passed and none of the fellows came around to coddle and coax him. He had felt certain that he would be approached by some of them, and repeatedly he had rehearsed the speeches by which he would let them know exactly how he felt about it, resolved carefully to avoid uttering a word which might

convey the impression that he regarded himself as a single whit at fault.

But no one—not even Cooper or Tuttle—approached him, and he began to believe that the time he had spent in constructing and committing those speeches of mingled defense and accusation had been wasted. He had once been deeply concerned in a plan by which Rodney Grant had been practically ostracized by the academy boys, and now, to his deepening rage, while Grant floated high on the wave of popularity, he found himself ignored.

Phil was naturally a sociable fellow, and a very little of such treatment was sufficient to make him suffer keenly. Nevertheless he sought to hide the fact beneath a haughty and disdainful air, which was a course his disposition and temperament hardly qualified him to do.

His sister, who had not attended the game at Clearport, was the first of his family to learn that he had fibbed about that game, and this she did not discover until the following Monday morning, when her chum, Lela Barker, told her everything.

"Oh, Phil," Sadie had said when she found a chance to speak with him privately, "what made you tell father such a whopper about the game? Why, it wasn't stopped by rain at all, and they say you ran away right in the middle of it, and that Roger wanted you after that when they got to hitting Rodney, and that you couldn't be found anywhere, and that all the fellows are sore on you because you skipped out, and that——"

"Oh, cut it!" interrupted Phil. "What do I cuc-care what they say! Let them talk their heads off."

"But, Phil," persisted the girl, "what made you do it? You don't want to get everybody down on you, do you?"

"They can get down on me or not, just as they pup-please!" he flung back. "I know when I get a rotten deal, and Roger Eliot, or Rod Grant, or anybody else can't wipe his feet on me more than once—that's all!"

On Monday, when school was over for the day and the fellows hurried over to the gym to dress for practice, Phil walked stiffly out of the yard and turned his steps toward home. It is true that

he longed and almost hoped to hear some one of those fellows calling after him, but not a soul seemed to observe which way he went, and resentful anger blazed yet more fiercely in his soul.

Thus it was upon Tuesday night, when he observed that Roy Hooker was one of the fellows who hastened toward the gym, which was enough to convince him that Roy had practically been taken onto the team to do a portion of the pitching.

When his sister again tried to talk with him about baseball that night he cut her off in such a snappy, savage manner that she was really frightened.

The next night, however, he did not walk down the path to the gate in view of the scholars, so that they might take notice that he declined to accompany the baseball squad. Instead of that, he dodged back round the corner of the academy, crossed the yard at the rear, and took the footpath across the field to High Street.

He was lonely and cast down and bitterly disappointed; for had he not sounded the professed friendship of his chums of yesterday and found

it very shallow! Not one of them had shown the decency to give him a word of cheer; they were willing that he, who but a short time ago they were regarding as their star slabman, should slide back into shadows and forgetfulness, while a practical stranger from a distant part of the country filled his place. It was hard to believe of them, but he told himself he was glad to find out just what they were.

Had Grant himself shown a further inclination to friendly advances Phil might have met him halfway, but the Texan had some pride of his own, and he was not the kind to seek continued rebuffs. Had he known that Springer was ready and yearning to yield, doubtless Rod would have lost not a minute in again putting forth the hand of friendship; but, being unaware of what was passing in Phil's heart, and feeling that already he had tried to do the right thing, the boy from the Lone Star State remained aloof with the others.

Halfway across the field, as the path curved round some bushes, Springer came upon Herbert Rackliff, sitting on a stone, manicuring his nails

with the file blade of a pearl-handled knife, a cigarette clinging to his moistened lower lip.

"Hello," said Herbert, with no intonation of surprise, as he looked up. "How do you happen to be dodging across this way, Springer?"

Phil was annoyed. He had never liked Rackliff. Still here was some one to whom he could talk, and desire to "chin" was strong upon him. He stopped.

"This is a short cuc-cut for me," he explained. "What are you doing here?"

"Trimming my nails a bit. Have to do my own manicuring down in this jumping-off place, and I never have time for it mornings; barely get to the old academy soon enough to escape the tardy record—sometimes I don't escape. Never knew you to come this way before, even if it is a short cut. In a hurry?"

"Ye-yes—no, not exactly; but this was as good a way as any."

"You don't seem to be practicing with the great Oakdale nine," said Herbert, bringing forth a fresh cigarette. "I'm surprised at that."

"Are you? Well, you needn't be."

In lighting the cigarette Rackliff was seized by a choking fit of coughing, which led him to wipe his eyes with a dainty silk handkerchief.

"I knew I'd catch a beastly cold coming home through the rain the other night on that old lemon of Hooker's," he said when he could get his breath. "I hate a cough; it always seems to tear my lungs out. Next thing I know I'll be throwing one of 'em up."

"You don't look well."

"I have felt better. Never mind, I'll get over it; but, oh! you bet your life you'll never catch me on a motorcycle again. They are rotten dirty things anyhow; simply cover you with dust when they don't paste you with mud. Have a smoke?"

"Don't care if I do," said Phil, accepting the proffered cigarette case and selecting one. "I don't make a practice of using the things, but I need something to cheer me up."

Rackliff also supplied a match, and then motioned toward a near-by stone, urging Phil to sit down and make himself comfortable.

"You haven't looked hilariously cheerful of

late," said the city youth. "Sort of taken your downfall to heart, haven't you?"

"My dud-downfall?"

"Yes. Oh, you're down and out, all right, and you must realize it—you do, too. Your proficient pupil, Mr. Rodney Grant, has tumbled you off the pedestal and taken your place."

"I wish you wouldn't tut-talk about him!" cried Phil.

Herbert shrugged his narrow shoulders and smiled.

"You don't like him any better than I do, that's plain. You thought you liked him once, but you've found him out. He's a conceited pup. Strange how everybody seems to fall for him, even Lela Barker. Now she's just about the nicest little clipper around these parts, but she's got country ideas, and she can't see the difference between a gentleman and a common cow-puncher—which latter Grant is, and mighty common, at that. Your sister is Lela's chum; I should think you might get your sister to open Miss Barker's eyes to that fellow. Couldn't you

show him up somehow and fix it so your sister would put Lela wise to him?"

"If I could, I wouldn't take all that trouble," replied Phil, who had seated himself and was puffing at the cigarette in a way that threatened to demolish it in short order. "He isn't worth it."

"Perhaps not, but I should think you'd want to get back at him after the turn he's done you. I never saw anything dirtier—never. After you coached him he simply wormed his way into Eliot's favor and crowded you out as soon as he could. He's got everybody saying that he's a better pitcher than you ever were or ever could be. You bet he doesn't miss a chance to sneer about you behind your back; that's him. I'm glad you've shown spirit enough to resent it, and not to go crawling around after him or any of the rest of that bunch."

"You'll never see me cuc-crawling after anybody!" cried Springer fiercely; "and Grant better keep a decent tut-tongue in his head! He needn't think because he happens to have an ugly temper and belongs to a fighting family that everybody

is afraid of him. I can stand a lot, but there's a limit."

Herbert turned his head away for a moment to conceal the gleam of satisfaction that sprang into his eyes, coughing behind his hand.

"You're made of different stuff from that soft slob Hooker," he said. "I did think that Hook had some sand and spirit, but I've changed my mind; he has just about as much backbone as a jellyfish. He can talk and blow, but it's all wind. You're a fellow with genuine spirit and pride; nobody wipes his feet on you."

"Not if I know it," growled Phil, flattered by the words of the crafty fellow.

"Of course not; and that's the way to be. It's only the marks who let themselves be used for footmats; Hooker's a mark. They'll use him, all right. He'll do the dirty work they would have given you if you'd let them, while Grant will get all the glory."

Springer laughed. "Perhaps he won't get as much glory as he expects. Clearport came near batting him out. Wait until he goes against Wyndham next Saturday."

"Now you're talking!" exclaimed Rackliff with enthusiasm. "There will be something coming to him then. I fancy it may be possible that you would enjoy seeing Wyndham beat Oakdale?"

"Shu-surest thing you know," answered Phil, who had been cleverly led into making such a confession. "I hope Wyndham eats them up alive!"

"Your desire will be gratified. Wyndham will make monkeys of them."

"You're confident."

"Dead sure."

"I don't just see how you can be."

"I suppose you've heard how Wyndham actually buried Barville last Saturday. The score was seventeen to three—something awful."

"But Clearport came mum-mighty near beating Wyndham the week before."

Herbert winked wisely. "Maybe they did, and maybe they didn't," he said.

"Oh, but they did! They batted Wyndham's new pitcher, Newbert, off the slab."

At this Rackliff laughed. "Tell it to the marines. I happen to know Dade Newbert; we

were chums. I own up I was surprised when I heard how the Porters had biffed him. Wrote him asking about it. He'd been out the night before the game—out with a hot bunch playing poker till daylight. He didn't want to pitch anyhow, but the captain just shoved him in; so when he got tired and Wyndham seemed to have a safe lead, he just lobbed the ball over and let Clearport hit. Of course he was taken out, and that gave him a chance to look on while Twitt Crowell did the heavy work."

"If that's right," said Phil, "Newbert can't be trusted. Why, he might have thrown the game away."

"Oh, he reckoned Crowell was good enough for the Porters, that's all. The result proved his judgment correct."

"Still a fellow who'll tut-take such chances is liable to do anything. He cuc-can't have any real loyal interest in his team. If he took a notion, he'd throw a game."

"You must remember," reminded Rackliff, "that Newbert doesn't belong in Wyndham, and it really doesn't make any great difference to

him whether that team wins or not. Of course, if he's pitching, ordinarily he'll do as well as he can on his own account. And let me tell you, Spring, old fel, he's a lulu; there's nothing down in this neck of the woods that can pitch with him. I'm betting that he makes the Oakdale batters look like monkeys."

"You haven't had very good lul-luck betting, have you?"

"Might have done better," admitted Herbert, shrugging. "I'll even it all up next Saturday, though, if these pikers around here have sand enough to give me another show."

"Perhaps you will, and, then again, perhaps——"

"I'll bet you five or ten, even money, that Wyndham wins."

"Thought you went bub-broke last Saturday."

"I'll have some more money by to-morrow."

"Well, I don't want to bet. I hope Wyndham does win. It will make me happy."

"Then you'll be happy, all right, Bo."

"Looks like the fight for the championship will be between Wyndham and Oakdale. If Wynd-

ham takes the first game from Oakdale, the chances for this town will be mum-mighty slim."

Herbert rose to his feet.

"Oakdale hasn't one chance in a hundred to win next Saturday," he declared in a manner which seemed to denote that he positively believed what he was saying. "It's dead lucky for you, old man, that you're not going to pitch. Your dear friend Grant is enjoying great popularity just at present, but even the dummys will realize that he's a fourth-rater after they see him pitch against Newbert. Dade knows what I want him to do, and for old times sake he'll do his prettiest. And, by the way, if you want to coin some easy money, just find a sucker who is ready to back Oakdale for a little bet."

CHAPTER XXII.

SELF-RESTRAINT OR COWARDICE.

Rackliff had succeeded in doubling Springer's hatred for Rodney Grant. So the fellow Phil had befriended and taught to pitch was sneering about him behind his back! And everybody was saying that Grant was already a better pitcher than his instructor ever could hope to become! Springer wondered how it was possible that, even for a moment, he had ever taken a fancy to such a chap.

"He'd better not say too much about me," Phil growled to himself. "I know he is a fighter. I know he has a fearful temper. But he'll find out I'm not afraid of him."

That very night Lela Barker, coming to the post office to mail some letters, was followed and annoyed by Rackliff when she started to return home. Herbert persisted in forcing his unwelcome company upon her until, catching sight of

a familiar figure passing on the opposite side of the street, she called for assistance.

Rodney Grant came running across, giving Rackliff a look, cap in hand, as he inquired the cause of the girl's alarm.

"Oh, Rod," she said, "I do wish you would walk home with me. This—this fellow has persisted in following me and forcing his company upon me."

"The onery, conceited, unmannerly cad!" exploded the Texan, evidently itching to put hands on Herbert, who bluffed the situation through with insolent effrontery, laughing as he lighted a cigarette. "What he needs is a good thrashing, and, if he wasn't a sickly, insignificant creature, it would give me a right good heap of satisfaction to hand him one."

"Bah!" said Herbert. "You're a big blowhard, that's all. It betrays lamentably poor taste on Miss Barker's part to prefer the company of a lout like you to that of a gentleman."

It was lucky for Rackliff that Lela was there and her hand fell on the arm of the boy from Texas, for otherwise Rodney might have for-

gotten himself. Fearing his lack of self-restraint, the girl urged him away, and they left Herbert leaning against a tree and still laughing, his cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

Half an hour later Grant, having returned, was talking baseball with several fellows who had gathered in a group near Stickney's store, when Rackliff sauntered up.

"Just a word with you, Mr. Cowpuncher," said Herbert in a loud voice. "You applied several objectionable adjectives to me a while ago, and now I want to tell you just what I think about you. You're nothing but a common, low-bred, swaggering bluffer, as the blind dubs around here are due to find out. You think you're a baseball pitcher. Excuse me while I laugh in my sleeve. You're the biggest case of egotistical jackassism it has ever been my luck to encounter. Next Saturday, when you get up against a real pitcher who can pitch, you'll look cheaper than thirty cents."

Grant surveyed the speaker with mingled amusement and disdain.

"Have you got that dose of bile out of your

system?" he asked. "If it's all over, go lie down somewhere and forget yourself. That will be a relief. Being ashamed all the time sure must get tiresome."

Herbert lost his head at once. "You're a duffer and a bluffer!" he shouted shrilly. "How any decent, refined girl can have anything to do with you I can't imagine. It just shows that Lela Barker is——"

He got no further, for, brushing one of the fellows aside, Grant caught the speaker by the throat and stopped him. His face dark, the Texan shook Rackliff until his teeth rattled.

"Shoot your mouth off about me as much as you please, you miserable sneak," he grated; "but don't you dare ring in the name of any decent girl unless you are thirsting to get the worst walloping of your life!"

Rod's eyes blazed and he was truly terrible. Once before the boys had seen him look like that, and then they had realized for the first time that it was the young Texan's uncontrollable temper that he feared and which had made him, by persistent efforts to avoid personal encounters, ap-

pear like a coward. There was not a cowardly drop of blood in Grant's body, but experience and the record of his fighting father had taught him to fear himself.

Even now the fact that he let himself go sufficiently to lay hands on Rackliff seemed to spur him on, and, still shaking the limp and helpless fellow, he maintained his hold on the city youth's neck until Herbert's eyes began to bulge and his face grew purple.

Suddenly another lad pushed his way through the circle and seized Grant by the shoulders:

"Lul-let up on that!" he cried, his voice vibrant with excitement. "What are you trying to do, choke the lul-life out of a fellow that you know isn't any match for you? If you want to ch-choke somebody, let him alone and take me."

It was Phil Springer. His head jerked round toward his shoulder, Rodney Grant looked into the eyes of his friend of a short time past, and suddenly he released his hold on Rackliff, who, gasping and ready to topple over, was supported by one of the other boys.

"If you want to choke somebody, take me!"

repeated Phil savagely. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Grant took a long breath. "That's right, Springer," he admitted, "I reckon I ought. I allow I clean forgot myself."

Somehow this quiet admission. which was wholly unexpected, seemed to enrage Phil still more.

"I suppose you think everybub-body around here is afraid of you now that they've found out your father was a genuine bad man," Springer sneered. "Well, you'll discover there's one person who isn't afraid. I'll fight you."

To the amazement of all present, the boy from Texas shook his head, something like a conciliatory smile appearing on his face.

"You won't fight *me,* Phil," he retorted, "for I won't fight."

Phil himself could not understand why this refusal simply added fuel to the flame of his wrath. He felt himself a-quiver with the intensity of his emotions, and, seeing Grant so calm and self-possessed, he was obsessed by a yearning to strike him in the face.

"Oh, so you won't fight, eh? Why not?"

"We have been friends."

"We have been, but aren't any more, and we never will be again; for I've found out just what sort of a fellow you are. You think yourself a better pitcher than I am or ever can be, do you? Oh, I've heard what you've been blowing around here about me, and you needn't deny it. You've had some luck in one or two games, but you're due to get your bumps. If you've got any fuf- further talk to make about me, come and make it before my face. It's a sneak who goes round shooting off his mouth behind another fellow's back—and that's what you are, Rod Grant!"

"Now there'll be something doing, sure!" breathed Chipper Cooper, agitated by great expectations.

Still, to the increasing wonderment of the boys, Grant held himself in hand.

"I couldn't take that off you, Phil," he said, a bit huskily, "if we hadn't been friends and I didn't realize that you sure would never say it in your right mind. I'm right sorry——"

"Oh, yes," scoffed Phil derisively, "you're sus-

sorry you can't work me for a chump any more. You know what I think of you, and if you've got any real sand you'll pick it up. All I ask is a square show, and I'll give you the scrap of your life. You can't frighten me with your savage looks, and I've got my bub-blinkers on you so you can't catch me off my guard and hit me. That's the way you've won your reputation as a fuf-fighter around these parts. You've never faced anybody in a sus-square stand-up scrap, but you've grabbed and ch-choked fellows like Bunk Lander and Herbert Rackliff when they weren't expecting it. I know a little something about handling my dukes, and I'll bet I can lick you in less than tut-ten minutes."

"Perhaps you can," said Grant.

"Gee whiz!" spluttered Chipper Cooper. "What do you know about that, fellows?"

It was true that Grant had never engaged in a real fist fight since coming to Oakdale, but he had once stretched an enemy prone and stiff with a single sudden blow, and since the brave part he had played in rescuing Lela Barker from

drowning Phil was the first to question his courage.

Herbert Rackliff, having recovered his breath and found sufficient strength to stand without assistance, was looking on and listening in the greatest satisfaction. "Soak him, Phil!" he whispered faintly. "Go for him!"

"Perhaps you're right," said Grant again, as Springer surveyed him with marked contempt. "Anyhow, I certain am not going to fight you."

Springer seemed genuinely disappointed. "I have a mind to punch you," he declared. "Perhaps you'd brace up then and show a little manhood."

Rod retreated a step, which added to the impression that he was afraid.

"You'll be sorry some time, old chap," he said, "just as I would be if I permitted you to lead me into a wretched fight. You don't understand——"

"Oh, yes I do; I understand everything. I've gug-got you sized up for just what you are, a big case of bluff. I've cuc-called you, and your show-down is mighty rotten. Bah! If the fel-

lows around here want to think you the whole shooting match after this, they're welcome to do so. But in order to keep your reputation as a dangerous character you'll have to do something besides jump on fellows like Rackliff and Lander."

Disdainfully he turned his back on Grant.

"You chaps can sus-see just what sort of a creature your fine hero is," he said. "Now hang around him as much as you like, and worship him. You all make me sick!"

He walked away, followed hastily by Rackliff. At the corner above the square Herbert overtook Phil, who seemed surprised as he came up.

"Oh, say," chuckled the city youth, "you did bore it into him fine! And he didn't dare put a hand on you, either. That was queer, for, my word! he's strong as Sandow. He handled me as easy as if I wasn't out of knickerbockers."

"Paugh!" said Phil. "Anybody could do that. You've sus-sucked cigarettes until you haven't as much strength as a sick kitten."

"Oh, I don't know about that," retorted Rackliff resentfully. "I guess I'm about as strong

as the average fellow; but I tell you he's a holy terror—a perfect Hercules. I thought every minute he'd open on you. I don't see why he didn't, for you rubbed it in to the limit."

"He didn't dare, that's the reason why," declared Springer. "I've got him sized up now; he's the kind that strikes when the other chap isn't lul-looking."

"I guess you're right. I called him a bluffer, too. It was first rate of you to step in and take my part."

"I didn't do it on your account."

"No?"

"Not at all. I was itching for an excuse to get at him, and you provided one, that's all."

Herbert was somewhat taken aback by this frank confession.

"Well," he said slowly, "anyhow, you showed him up to that bunch of lickspittles. They were surprised."

"I fuf-fancy so. This whole town has got the notion that Rod Grant is simply it. They thought he would fight at the drop of the hat."

"What would you have done if he'd taken you up?"

"Whipped him," answered Phil confidently. "I've taken boxing lessons. What does he know about scientific fighting? I had made up my mum-mind to take care that it was a regular fight by rounds, with seconds and a referee to see fair play. I'd certainly fixed him that way, all right."

Still, to his annoyance, Rackliff seemed doubtful. "Perhaps you would, but if he'd ever got in one wallop——"

"Oh, you make me tut-tired!" exclaimed Springer.

"Well, even if you didn't butt in on my account, I'm much obliged, just the same. You're all right, Spring, old fel, and if I can do you a good turn I will. Perhaps I'll have the chance. Gee! I want a whiff. Have a smoke?"

"No," declined Phil. "I'm going home. Good night."

He left Herbert there, lighting a cigarette and coughing hollowly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOOKER BREAKS WITH RACKLIFF.

Passing Hooker's home on his way down into the village Thursday evening, Rackliff saw a light in the carriage house, which led him to fancy he might find Roy there. In this he was not mistaken; Hooker was puttering over his motorcycle by the light of a lantern. Hearing a footstep on the gravel outside, he looked up and perceived the visitor entering by the open door.

"Hello," said Herbert.

"Hello," grunted Hooker, without any effort at cordiality or welcome.

"Tinkering with that old thing again, I see," coughed Rackliff.

"Thanks to you, I am."

"Thanks to me?"

"Yes; it has been out of order ever since you used it last. Baseball practice doesn't give me

much time to work on it by daylight, and so I'm trying to get her running now."

"Take my advice and pay somebody to remove the thing. It's the biggest old lemon I ever saw. All it's worth is its price as junk. Gee! I'm feeling rotten." He sat down on a box, coughing again.

Indeed Herbert did not look well, and there seemed to be something of an alarming nature in the sound of his cough. His thin cheeks were flushed and feverish.

"You don't have to worry yourself about it," returned Roy warmly. "It's mine, and I presume I can do anything I please with it."

"Awful touchy to-night," muttered Rackliff. He lighted a cigarette, but the first whiff threw him into a most distressing fit of coughing and he flung it out through the open door. "Can't seem to get anything out of a smoke," he complained. "Cigarettes don't taste good, and they raise the merry dickens with this old cough of mine. I've got a beastly headache, and I suppose I ought to be in bed, but I've got to go down to

the postoffice. Expect a letter from Newbert to-night."

"So you're corresponding with him, are you?" said Roy, wiping his greasy hands on some cotton waste.

"Sure. Why not? We were chums, you know."

"And of course you still think him the greatest pitcher that ever happened?"

"He's just about the greatest in his class; you'll find that out Saturday. Watch how he shows Cowboy Grant up. Say, Springer rather showed that fellow up, too, didn't he?"

"How do you mean?"

"You know; the way he made him pull his horns and take water."

"Who says Phil Springer made Rod Grant take water?"

"I do. I was there and saw it. Your Texan hasn't got any nerve. He's the biggest case of fake to be found in seven States. He's strong, I'm not denying that; but when he saw that Springer really meant business he didn't dare do a thing."

"I've heard the fellows talking about it," said Hooker, "but I don't believe Grant was afraid of Phil Springer. A fellow who would take the chances he did to save Lela Barker from drowning couldn't be frightened by Springer."

"I've heard about that, too, and, as near as I can make out, Grant took those chances because he had to."

"Had to? Why——"

"He had to after he got caught by the current and carried over the dam with the girl. There couldn't be any backing out then. I'll bet he never would have jumped into the water at all if he'd stopped a moment to consider the danger. According to the story I've heard, it was really that big lout, Bunk Lander, who did the great act of heroism and saved both Grant and the Barker girl; but of course Grant got most of the credit. Anyway, I know that some fellows have lost a bit of their confidence in the cowpuncher since Springer faced him down; they're due to get the rest of it shaken out before the game ends Saturday."

"I suppose you're mighty confident again that Oakdale will get beaten?"

"It's a certainty this time, Hook. Let me give you a little tip. You lost some money on that game with Barville, and this is the chance to win it back. Bet on Wyndham Saturday and you'll even up your mistake before."

"My mistake! It wasn't my mistake; it was yours. Besides, you didn't keep your word about making good any loss I might suffer. You put me in a nasty hole, Rackliff."

"I don't see why. To hear you talk, anybody might think you were ruined instead of merely getting hit for less than a fiver. Never knew a fellow to put up such a squeal over a little money."

Hooker's cheeks were flushed and he faced Herbert, his undershot jaw seeming to project still further than usual.

"I lost more than that," he said.

"What? You did? Why, you only gave me four dollars and——"

"I lost something more than money."

"You didn't tell me about it."

"I haven't told anyone—but my mother. I had to tell her the other day. When you wanted me to bet on that game I told you I didn't have any money."

"Yes."

"But I knew where my mother had some money put away in a drawer—some money she had been saving up a little at a time to buy the material for a new dress. I went into that drawer and took that money. You were so positive that I could not lose that I—well, I *stole* the money."

"Dear me!" said Herbert, grinning and coughing behind his thin hand. "What did the old girl say when she found it out?"

"She never suspected me," said Roy. "She couldn't think I would do such a thing. And I —I lied about it. When she discovered the money was gone and became distressed over its loss, I lied."

"You would have been a fool if you'd owned up."

"I was a fool to touch a cent of that money, in the first place. I was a fool to listen to your blarney, Rackliff. Just because I was idiot

enough to believe in you, I made myself a thief and a liar. Oh, I've been punished for it, all right. Never knew I had a conscience that could make me squirm so much. Some nights I slept mighty mean."

"Paugh! You make me laugh. It wasn't anything to take a few paltry dollars like that. You're mother'll never know."

"She knows now."

"What?"

"I told her."

"You did?"

"Sure."

"Well, you are a big chump! What made you do that?"

"I had to. You can't understand how rotten I felt when I saw her crying over the loss of that money. I was ashamed and sick—oh, sick as a dog! I made up my mind I'd pay it back, every cent."

"And so you can if you'll just get hold of another fiver and bet it on Wyndham."

"I've paid it back already, all but fifty cents. Why do you think I stayed out of school to

work at any old job I could get? I'm not particularly stuck on work, but I couldn't go on feeling that I was a thief—that I had stolen from my own mother. That's what you brought me to, Rackliff."

Herbert sneered. "That's right, blame it all on me and let yourself out entirely. Now let me tell you something, my bucko: it was your overweening conceit, your jealousy of Springer and Grant, your itching desire to see them get their bumps, that led you, as much as anything else, to bet against Oakdale in that first game. You were sore on Eliot, too, because he didn't put you in to pitch—and you couldn't pitch a little bit. When I bet against Oakdale, I did so on judgment; you did so because of prejudice and spite. Now, don't put on any virtuous frills with me, for I'm not feeling good to-day, and you make me tired."

The insolence of the fellow infuriated Hooker, who, nevertheless, knew there was no little truth in what he had been told. Restraining himself with an effort, Roy attempted to retort sarcastically.

"So you bet on *judgment,* did you? Well, you must confess your judgment was mighty poor. And, to make the thing safe, you made arrangements to betray Oakdale's pitching signals to Barville. *I* didn't know anything about that—until after the game. If I had known in advance——"

"Now what would you have done?" asked Herbert, snapping his fingers. "If you had found out about that after your money was wagered on Barville, I presume you would have warned your dear friend Eliot and sacrificed everything! I've noticed that you have kept mighty still about it since you did find out."

"Yes, I've kept still, because you failed in your crooked scheme, and because—well, because I wasn't anxious to have it known that I bet the way I did, and I knew you'd retaliate by peaching on me if I breathed a word concerning you."

Herbert laughed and coughed at the same time. "Just so. Wise boy. I certainly should have done just that. Let me tell you now that things will be fixed doubly solid for the game next Saturday, and——"

"Look here," cried Roy, facing the visitor threateningly, "if you attempt to repeat that trick in Wyndham I'll expose you sure as shooting. I mean it. You can't frighten me. You can tell that I bet against my own team if you want to, but——"

"I presume you're perfectly willing that I should tell how you came by the money? Oh, I guess you'd keep still even if I tried the same trick over again."

"I wouldn't. Try it and see! I've paid the money back, and you can't keep me still that way. I'm pitching on the team now, and I want to see it win."

"Too bad you're going to be so keenly disappointed. You won't do any pitching against Wyndham, that's a cinch. Eliot has been forced to take you up as a makeshift since losing Springer, but you'll be used only in the minor games. Grant will do all the heavy work in the big games, and get all the glory. The first time I heard you talk, Hook, I thought you had some real spirit; but I've found out that you're just a common weak-kneed, aspiring sycophant, ready

to feed on crumbs and lick the hand that flings them to you."

"I've heard about enough from you!" snarled Hooker. "I think you'd better get. I don't want to put my hands on you, but I shall if you stay any longer and shoot off your face. I think you and I will call it quits, Rackliff; I want no further dealings with you. And let me tell you before you go that if I find out you're up to any of your tricks Saturday I'll put the fellows wise. You can't frighten me into keeping still."

Herbert rose and walked to the door. "You poor, fawning dub!" he said. "You'll be blacking Eliot's boots next. I'm glad to be done with you. But don't forget what I said, it's fixed so Wyndham's dead sure to win Saturday. I'm going to bet every cent I can raise on it."

"Well, I'm glad I'm done with *him!*" muttered Roy, closing the door as Herbert went coughing down the gravel drive.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ONCE MORE.

Rackliff turned through Lake Street toward the square in the center of the village, muttering to himself about Hooker, whom he now thoroughly despised as a "soft thing" and a "quitter." As he approached the Town Hall a low whistle like a signal reached his ears, and he saw a dark figure standing in the shadows near one corner of the building.

"It must be Springer," said Herbert. "Now we'll find out if he has any sand or is a quitter, too."

It was Springer, who spoke in a low tone as Herbert turned and drew near. "I thought it just as well for us not to meet where we would be seen," said Phil, "so I watched for you here, being pretty sure you'd come this way. There's a bub-bunch of the fellows down at Stickney's."

"Good!" returned Herbert. "I hope they've

got their mazuma with them, for I've got my cash at last, and I'm on the warpath. It'll be just like finding money for me if they'll only give me a chance at them."

"You're just as confident as ever that Wyndham will win?"

"My boy, I tell you it's a cold cinch; it's fixed so that Wyndham can't lose."

"What do you mean by 'fixed'?"

Rackliff hesitated; recalling his late interview with Hooker, he decided that it would be unwise to tell Springer too much.

"Never you mind what I mean, old sport," he returned. "Leave it to me. I wasn't born yesterday. What these Joshuas around here have won off me already will serve nicely as bait. I'm bound to get them this time, and, as we're friends, I'm letting you in on the deal. After the rotten way you've been treated, it should make you feel well to get the chance. I'll place your loose coin on Wyndham, and not a soul need know about it until you're ready for him to know. Perhaps by and by, when this old baseball team is all to the punk, you'll feel like coming out openly

and informing them that you've added to your bank account by betting against them; but, if you don't happen to feel that way, you can keep still and enjoy the fruits of your cleverness—which should be some satisfaction for the raw deal that's been handed out to you."

The fellow's words and manner were suave and seductive, and, if Phil had wavered, he now put his hesitation aside.

"Oh, I'm ready to take a ch-chance," he declared. "I want to see them done up, and I'm not at all averse to winning some money through their defeat. Wyndham has always had rather the better team at baseball or football, and I see no reason to believe she won't have this year."

"And every reason for believing she will have, considering the fact that a dandy like Dade Newbert is going to pitch for her. Wait till you see him in action; it will open your eyes. How much money have you got?"

Springer moved until the light of the street lamp in front of the postoffice over the way shone upon him, plunging his hand into his pocket and bringing up a lot of silver.

"Here's five dollars in ten-cent pieces," he said; "and I've got two dollars besides."

"Seven plunks, all told. But say, I hope you didn't get this chicken feed the way Hooker got his that he let me have to bet on the Barville game."

"Eh? How did he get it?"

"Stole it; swiped it off his own mother. What do you know about that, Bo?"

"Stole it!" cried Phil. "Well, you nun-needn't think I got mine that way! I'm no thief!"

"I should hope not. I'm not eager to chum with a fellow of that sort, and I've cut Hooker out; told him what I thought of him and quit him for good. He's too cheap for me." Herbert coughed behind his hand, his air one of great virtue and uprightness.

"These dimes came from my ten-cent bank," explained Springer. "I've been saving them one at a tut-time as I could spare them, and I had it pretty near full. When I mum-made up my mind to bet—or let you bet for me—I got enough to fill the bank and break it open; and that's why there are so many of them. Here they are; you

can count them if you want to. And here's two dollars more."

Rackliff accepted the money and pocketed it. "Don't suppose you want a receipt?" he asked, laughing.

"Nun-no," faltered Phil, suddenly realizing that Herbert could deny the whole transaction if he saw fit to do so, and that there would be no way of proving it had ever taken place. In spite of the fact that circumstances and mutual sympathies had led him into taking up with the city boy, he did not feel that a fellow of Herbert's stamp was wholly to be trusted.

"Nun-no," mocked Rackliff with an intonation of resentment. "I swear that was weak! I believe you are shaky. If so you'd better take your money back—quick."

"No, no," objected Springer. "It's all right. It was ju-just my rotten stammering, that's all. I wish I could break myself of it."

But suddenly Herbert grew very dignified. "We'll do this thing in a business-like way," he declared. "You don't know much about me, and a really square chap never gets haughty when

he's asked to give some proof of his squareness. Just come over under the lamp."

Protesting, Phil followed; and the city boy, heedless of those protests, brought forth a pocket-notebook and pencil, scribbled an acknowledgement of the money on a leaf of the book, dashed his name at the bottom, tore the leaf out and handed it over.

"I insist," he said. "Now everything's all right. This is a wicked world, and every fellow who's dead wise has a right to take precautions. You say there's a bunch down by Stickney's, eh? Well, I think I'll meander down that way and see if I can't prod them into making a few wagers. Good night, old fel; sleep tight and don't worry about the chink you've let me handle. It will be an investment that'll pay a hundred per cent. in double-quick time."

It was a delightfully warm spring night, and there on the platform of Stickney's store, where the softened light from within shone upon them through a huge window, the boys had gathered. They were chatting, jesting, chaffing one another, and occasionally playing pranks, which once or

twice started a squabble. As Rackliff sauntered up Chub Tuttle was complaining that nearly a pint of peanuts had been stolen from his pocket.

"Why don't you put Sleuth onter the case?" laughingly drawled Sile Crane. "He'll ketch the thief, for he's sartainly got Sherlock Holmes beat to a frazzle."

"My deduction is," said Piper, loudly shuffling his feet to drown the noise as he stealthily cracked a peanut, "that there are scoundrels in our very midst who would feel no compunction in swiping plugged money from a contribution box. Doubtless," he continued, deftly snapping the shelled kernels into his mouth, "the hands of those scoundrels are even now at work."

"Sleuthy's right," said Chipper Cooper, swiftly stowing away a handful of the peanuts which he had skillfully removed from Piper's coat pocket while the latter was speaking; "there are villyuns among us. Anyhow, there's liable to be one in a minute, unless we move." Apparently this concluding remark was caused by the appearance of Rackliff, who came strolling into the light of the window and paused.

"SEVERAL PROMINENT MEMBERS OF THE GREAT OAKDALE BASEBALL TEAM, I OBSERVE," SAID RACKLIFF.—PAGE 251.

Herbert looked them over. "Several prominent members of the great Oakdale baseball team, I observe," he said. "Been talking of the coming game, I presume."

"You're presuming, as usual," returned Cooper.

"That remark is very stale; I think I've heard you use it before. Your efforts at wit are painful. I suppose you're pretty confident, after beating both Barville and Clearport? Now I'm confident myself; I have confidence——"

"You look like a confidence man," interrupted Chipper.

"I have confidence," pursued Herbert, trying to ignore the little chap, "that Wyndham will win; and I'm ready to back my conviction with real money."

"Dinged if I didn't think yeou'd got abaout enough of it bating against Oakdale!" exclaimed Crane.

"Wonder where he gets so much money?" said Fred Sage.

"He's bluffing," was the opinion of Jack Nel-

son. "He's dead broke, but he wants to make believe that he's a dead game sport, and so——"

"If you think I'm dead broke," said Herbert, "and you can raise five or ten bones to wager on Oakdale, just produce the currency and watch me cover it. I have about twenty-five dollars I'd like to put up on Wyndham."

"Twenty-five dollars!" spluttered Tuttle. "That's some wealth for one fellow to be packing around."

"Go on," advised Crane, waving his long arm at Herbert; "don't bother us. We're tired takin' your spondulicks away from ye; it's too easy."

"You're quitters," declared Herbert with a cutting sneer. "There isn't one of you who has a real drop of sporting blood in his veins, that's what's the matter. You've won my money, and now, being pikers and quitters, you don't propose to give me a chance to win it back. You know Wyndham's going to put it all over you Saturday, and you're shivering in your shoes. I don't blame you for being frightened, as you haven't one chance in a hundred to take that game. It wouldn't surprise me if you were beaten about

twenty or thirty to nothing; I sincerely hope it won't be worse than that."

Crane rose to his feet in the midst of this speech, which was far more provoking and insulting than cold type can convey.

"Looker here, yeou," cried Sile; "I've got some money I won batin' with you, and, by thutter! you'll find I ain't afraid to give ye all the chance you want on that Wyndham game. If you've really got twenty-five dollars, mebbe we can raise a pool, same as we done before, and cover the whole of it. I'll put in my share anyhaow. Who's the next feller?"

"I am!"

"Count me in!"

"I'm another!"

"Same here!"

"Me, too!"

It seemed that they were all eager to contribute to the pool, and Herbert, smiling with self-complaisant satisfaction, felt that he had cleverly accomplished his purpose.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WYNDHAM PITCHER.

Shortly before nine o'clock on Saturday morning a touring car, containing three youths, not one of whom was over eighteen years of age, whirled up before the door of Mrs. Conway's boarding house in Oakdale and stopped.

The occupants of the car did not belong in Oakdale; they came from Wyndham, and the machine was the property of the father of the oldest one, who was at the wheel. This was Orville Foxhall, second baseman of the Wyndham nine. At Foxhall's side sat a husky, raw-boned, long-armed chap, Dade Newbert, the pitcher on which Wyndham placed great dependence. The chap in the tonneau was Joe Snead, too fat and indolent to take part in any game of an athletic nature.

"This is the house, Dade," said Foxhall; "this is where your friend boards, all right."

"Humph!" grinned Newbert. "It doesn't look swell enough to suit Herb's style. He's the real warm article, as you'll realize when you see him. When it comes to cutting a dash—well, Rack can cut it, you bet. I'll see if he's around."

Springing out, Newbert strode to the door and rang. After a time, as he was growing impatient and had prepared to ring again, the door opened a foot or so, and a tall, thin, hopeless-looking woman surveyed him inquiringly.

Newbert asked for Rackliff.

"Yes, he boards here," answered the woman in a mechanical tone of voice; "but he isn't up yet."

"Ho, ho!" laughed Newbert. "Isn't up? Well, that's like him; won't pull himself away from the mattress until he has to. He's a luxurious brat."

"I'm afraid Mr. Rackliff may not be feeling very well this morning," said the woman. "He has a very bad cold and coughs terribly. I told him last night that he should consult a doctor, and I heard him coughing the greater part of the night."

"Well, well! Sorry to hear it. I'm an old friend of his, and I've come over by appointment to take him back to Wyndham with me. You tell him that——"

A harsh cough came echoing down the stairs and a voice called:

"That you, Dade? Come right up. It's all right, Mrs. Conway; let him come, please."

Herbert, in silk pajamas, was standing at the head of the stairs, looking ill indeed. He put out a limp hand, which Newbert grasped, crying:

"By Jove! you *are* sick. Now, that's tough."

"Come into my room," invited Herbert, leading the way. "It's a pretty bum joint, but it's the best in the house—the best I could find in this wretched hole of a town. I'm mighty glad to see you, old pal, though I may not appear to be. Oh, blazes! but I have got a headache!"

"What have you been doing?" asked the visitor, as Herbert keeled over, with a groan, on the bed. "Been hitting the pace? Been attending too many hot suppers? Oh, but you're sure to sport wherever you go!"

"Hitting the pace around this graveyard!"

mumbled Herbert dismally. "What are you talking about, old fel? Why, everybody dies here nights at nine o'clock; there's not a thing doing after that. It's the most forsaken, dismal place imaginable after that hour. I'm dying of dry rot, that's what's the matter." He finished with a cough that seemed to wrack him from head to feet.

"You're sick," said Newbert, with a show of sympathy. "You've got a cold, and it has settled on your lungs. You're none too strong, Herb, and you'd better look out. I guess you won't be able to take in the game to-day."

"Yes, I will!" cried Rackliff suddenly. "I wouldn't miss it for a fortune. Oh, I've got money bet on that game, Dade."

"Well, Orv Foxhall is outside with old man Foxhall's bubble. Great car, that. And you should see Orv drive her. Oh, he does cut it out some! He had 'em staring when he ripped up through the center of this old town. We nearly ran a team down back on the road; was going better than fifty when we came round a curve and grazed the old jay's wheel-hubs. I'll bet that

Reuben's hair stood on its hind legs. Ho! ho! ho!"

Herbert sat up. "It won't take me long to dress," he said. "I'll go back to Wyndham with you."

"You haven't had any breakfast."

"Don't want any. Haven't had an appetite for three days. I caught this rotten cold riding a motorcycle back here from Clearport after the game last Saturday. I wouldn't mind if this cough didn't tear me so."

"It's tough," said Newbert. "Can I help you? Going to take a dip?"

"Boo! No, I won't bathe this morning; haven't got the nerve for a cold plunge, and a warm one might fix me so I'd catch more cold. Just you make yourself comfortable as you can while I'm getting into my duds."

Three times while dressing Herbert was compelled to sit down to rest, and Newbert declared that his friend seemed to be pretty nearly "all in."

"I certainly am," agreed Rackliff; "I'm up against it. Never was knocked out like this be-

fore. Why, I can't even smoke a cigarette, it makes me bark so. You can imagine how tough that is on me. Sometimes I'm half crazy for a smoke—I'm shaking all over; but when I try it I just have to quit by the time I've taken three whiffs."

"You've smoked too many of those things, that's what's the matter. Used to hit 'em up myself; thought it real devilish. Never took any real satisfaction in it, though."

"That was because you didn't inhale; they're no good unless you do."

"They're no good if you do; give me a cigar every time."

"You got my last letter all right?" asked Herbert, selecting a necktie from his abundant supply.

"Oh, sure. I've put all the bunch wise, too. They're wondering how I got hold of the information, but I didn't give you away, old pal. I reckon mebbe Foxy and Snead suspect now, but they won't say anything."

"You've got to win," said Herbert, carefully knotting his tie at the mirror. "My old man is

kicking over being touched up for cash so often; says he can't see how I spend so much in this quiet place. I've bet every sou of the last amount he sent me on your old baseball team, and if you don't take this game——"

"We will, don't worry about that. We could have done so anyhow, but of course you've helped make it a dead-cold certainty. If you've got any friends here who——"

"Friends!" sneered Rackliff; "friends among these country yokels! Don't make me laugh, for it might start me coughing again."

"But you said you let a chap in on the Barville deal. He——"

"He wasn't a friend of mine," said Herbert scornfully; "he was only a chap I wanted to use. I've let another dub into this deal, but I didn't do so simply to befriend him—not on your natural. Perhaps you've heard of him—Phil Springer. He expected to be the star slab artist on the great Oakdale nine this season, but he unwisely coached another fellow to assist him as second-string pitcher, and now the other man has pushed him into second place—and he has quit, dead

sore. He's an egotistical yap, and it simply killed him to death to have his pupil step right over his head."

"What's your idea in boosting him by putting him next to a winning proposition?"

"Perhaps I can use him, too. At any rate, he can pitch some, and by keeping him raw and working him the way I am, I'm weakening the pitching staff. See?"

"Oh, yes," muttered Newbert. "I swear you're a clever schemer, Herb."

"Thanks. You see, I induced this man Springer to let me have seven bones to bet against Oakdale, and now, no matter how much they may happen to need him, as long as he has his money at stake, they can't coax him into the game today. They may try to do that if you fellows get to batting Grant good and plenty. Oh, I've taken pains to forestall in every direction, for I've simply got to make a killing on this go. How's the weather?"

"Fine, but you'll need to wear an overcoat in the auto. I didn't take one, but it's rather cool whistling through the air at the rate Foxy drives.

Besides, you've got to look out for that cold. Better wear a cloth overcoat now than a wooden one by and by."

"Don't talk that way," shivered Herbert. "I'm not anxious to shuffle off."

He brought his overcoat from the wardrobe, and Newbert helped him into it, after which they descended the stairs together.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PLUNGE FROM THE BRIDGE.

Herbert was introduced to Foxhall and Snead. The former, with goggles pushed up on his forehead, pulled off his gauntlet glove to shake hands, saying he was mighty glad to meet Dade Newbert's chum, of whom he'd heard so much from Newbert's lips.

"Yes," gurgled Snead, as he also shook hands; "according to Dade, you're a warm old scout. Get right in here with me, and hang on when Foxy turns on the juice, for there'll be something doing. I imagine we'll touch only a few of the very elevated spots on our way back, judging by the way he cut it out coming over. If you're nervous——"

"Don't worry about me," said Rackliff, as he settled himself beside the fat fellow. "I'm simply dying for something to stir up my blood and set it circulating."

Foxhall adjusted his goggles, switched on the current, and pressed a button that started the engine.

"Ho! ho! We're off!" cried Newbert. "Just watch 'em rubber when we zip down through town. There's a bump this side of the bridge; hang on when we strike it, Herb."

Foxhall turned the car, yanking it round in a see-saw that was hard on transmission and brakes and tires, and started with a jerk that gave a snap to the necks of his three companions, cutting out the muffler as he shifted swiftly through the gears into direct drive. When the main street was reached the reckless youth scarcely slowed down at all to take the turn, and the car came near skidding into the gutter.

"Isn't he the careless creature!" laughed Snead. "He always drives this way, and he's never had an accident."

Past Roger Eliot's home and the white Methodist church they whizzed, the automobile gathering speed on the down grade and obtaining enough momentum to carry it a considerable distance even though the power should be cut off

and the brakes applied sufficiently hard to lock the rear wheels. With the discordant electric horn snarling a demand for a clear road, the foolish young driver tore up the dust through the very heart of the village, regardless of his own safety and absolutely ignoring the safety or rights of others. The postoffice spun by on the left; the machine shot across the small square; down the steepest grade of the hill it flew toward the bridge.

Despite the fact that he pretended to be as serene and unconcerned as his companions, who, perhaps, did not realize the danger, Herbert Rackliff was not fully at his ease; for he knew that such driving through a place where there were intersecting streets with blind corners was folly indeed.

As the bridge was approached the road swung to the left. At the very end of the bridge an old building cut off the view of the greater part of the structure from any one approaching from the main portion of the village.

The "bump" of which Newbert had given warning was struck with sufficient force to send

the boys bouncing from their seats, and the shock seemed to disturb Foxhall's hold on the steering wheel, for the car swerved unpleasantly. The young driver brought it back with a yank, and then——

"Look out!" screamed Herbert, jumping up in the tonneau.

A woman of middle age, seated in a rickety old wagon, with a child on either side of her, was driving a young and half-broken horse into Oakdale. The young horse snorted, attempted to turn round, and then began to back up, cramping the wagon across the bridge. The woman struggled vainly with the reins, in a perfect panic of terror, and the children screamed, clinging to her.

Foxhall knew he could not stop the car, and to his credit let it be said that he did his best to avoid striking and smashing the wagon—and succeeded. Success, however, was costly; for, in attempting to turn aside and shoot past, the wheel was pulled too sharply, and the machine struck the wooden railing of the bridge, through

which it cut as if the railing had been built of cardboard.

Dade Newbert was the only one who managed to leap from the machine ere it crashed through that railing and shot off in a clean leap for the water below. Unimpeded by any barrier, Newbert jumped, struck the ground, plunged forward, and went sliding at full length almost beneath the wheels of the old wagon. Rackliff tried to jump, but he was on the wrong side, and the tonneau door bothered him; however, as the machine fell, with Snead sitting paralyzed in his place and Foxhall clinging to the wheel, Herbert succeeded in flinging himself out over the side.

Surprising to relate, Dade Newbert was not seriously hurt, and, still retaining a certain presence of mind, he scrambled back from the wagon wheels and sat up on the bridge, covered with dirt, a rather woe-begone spectacle. He was still sitting thus when the horse, having turned about at last without upsetting the wagon, went galloping away across the bridge; and he continued to sit there until some boys came running down

from the village, shouting as they ran, and asked him if he was hurt.

Then Dade scrambled up. "Oh, mercy!" he gasped. "Don't mind me. I'm all right. The other fellers—they'll be drowned!"

He ran to the side of the bridge and looked over. Foxhall was swimming toward the nearest bank, with Snead puffing and blowing behind him; but Rackliff, who had struck on his stomach sufficiently hard to have the breath knocked out of him, was being carried away by the current, struggling feebly.

With the idea of leaping in to help Herbert, Newbert pulled off his coat; but before he could make the plunge some one flung him aside with the sweep of a muscular arm and went shooting headlong like an arrow toward the surface of the river.

People were running toward the bridge from various directions. Some of the boys started down to help the swimmers out when they should reach the shore; but no one else ventured to plunge into the river.

The one who had made that unhesitating

plunge was Rodney Grant. Springer, who had reached the spot a moment ahead of Rod, saw Grant as he shot downward with hands outstretched and palms pressed together.

"Wh-why didn't I do it?" muttered Phil. "I didn't th-think quick enough."

He saw Grant's head appear above the surface and beheld the Texan striking out toward Rackliff with strong strokes that sent him forging through the water. The gathering crowd on the bridge began to cheer the rescuer.

"Of course!" whispered Phil savagely. "It's another feather in his cap! He'll help the chap out of the drink, and everybody in town will say it was a nervy and daring piece of heroism. Oh, I'm slow! I lost my chance!"

At that moment his bitterness toward Grant was so intense that he felt he could unhesitatingly go to any extreme to injure him. His lips curled back from his teeth in a semblance of a snarl; he watched the Texan reach the spot where Rackliff's head had an instant before disappeared from view, saw him likewise plunge beneath the surface, and beheld him rise, farther

down the stream, with the still weakly struggling fellow secured by a grip upon his coat collar at the back of the neck. Deftly the rescuer swung Herbert round, face upward, upon his back, and, holding him thus, with mouth and nose above the water, began swimming toward the nearest shore.

The rapidly increasing crowd of spectators on the bridge cheered still more vociferously.

"It's getting to be a regular sus-stunt of his, this rescuing people from drowning," muttered Springer. "Hear them yell! Bah! What fools people are! Why didn't I think quick enough to get ahead of him!"

A short distance below the bridge Foxhall was wading out of the water, disdaining assistance. Snead, however, did not spurn the hands extended to him when he came floundering and gurgling toward dry ground.

A dozen persons were running down toward the point for which Rodney Grant was heading, all eager to take some part in the exciting rescue. Of the boys who had rushed to the scene, Springer was the only one who remained on the bridge.

He waited until he beheld Grant stand on his feet in shallow water and wade toward the bank, bearing Rackliff in his arms.

"I don't propose to hang around and see them slobber over him," he whispered hoarsely; "so I think I'll beat it, get a move on, dig."

As he turned away his eyes fell on a folded sheet of paper lying at his feet, and within three feet of the paper he discovered a pocket notebook. He picked up the paper and the notebook.

"Some one of that bunch dropped these," he decided. "Oh, but they were lucky to come out of this scrape alive! I think this will cuc-cure that idiot Foxhall of doing fancy stunts with his old man's gas cart."

Mechanically he unfolded the paper. There was writing upon it, and Phil was suddenly chained in his tracks as his senses took in the meaning of those several short sentences, each of which was written on a separate line:

"Bat held in right hand means hit and run.

"In left hand, try the steal.

"In both hands, perpendicular, play safe.

"In both hands, horizontal, will sacrifice.

"In right hand, handle down, squeeze play."

This was as far as Phil read, but the list covered the entire page, being condensed, with the lines very close together, at the bottom, evidently in order to get everything on that side of the sheet. Springer's eyes threatened to pop out of his head and his under jaw sagged.

"Great snakes!" he gasped. "These are our playing signals!"

For a short time he stood there dazed, unconscious of the excitement near at hand, deaf to the cheering of the crowd. He had thought at first that the paper, like the notebook, must be the property of one of those boys who had occupied the automobile, but, with the discovery of what was written on that paper, he slowly arrived at the conclusion that his original conviction was erroneous. The writing looked familiar, too, although at that time he could not seem to recall the person whose chirography it resembled.

"The notebook," he finally decided; "that may

tell who it belongs to, for doubtless the same chap dropped both."

On the fly leaf of the notebook he found the name of Dade Newbert. He had refolded the paper, and was still staring at the name written in the notebook when Newbert himself, greatly excited, rushed toward him, crying:

"I say, that's mine! Dropped it out of my coat pocket when I pulled the coat off. Give it to me."

He was still carrying his coat in his hand.

"Then you're Nun-Newbert, are you?" questioned Springer, who until this day had never set eyes on the chap.

"Yes, yes. Gimme that! The paper, too. Have you——"

"Just picked them up," said Springer coolly, as he surrendered the folded paper. "Lul-looked in the book to see who it belonged to, that's all."

Newbert seemed to take a breath of relief. "I didn't know but you had been—— Oh, fudge! I dropped them only a minute ago. Say, we've kicked up a rumpus around here, haven't we? That fellow who pulled Rack out of the drink saved me from getting a soaking, as I was just

going overboard after Herb. Rack thought he wouldn't take a bath this morning, but he did, just the same. Ho! ho! ho!" The cause for the laugh seemed to be nervousness and excitement rather than mirth.

"Rackliff!" muttered Springer, struck by sudden conviction.

"Old chum of mine. Don't suppose this little experience will do his cold any good. I got Orv Foxhall to come over here for Herb this morning with old man Foxy's bubble that's down there at the bottom of the canal, where it's liable to stay for some time. I reckon we'll all travel back to Wyndham by steam cars." He turned and ran toward the crowd that was coming up from the scene of the rescue.

"Rackliff!" muttered Springer once more.

He knew now who had written those signals on that sheet of paper.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A REBELLIOUS CONSCIENCE.

The game between Oakdale and Wyndham was in progress, and, wretchedly miserable, Phil Springer sat watching from the bleachers. Never before in all his life had he felt so much like a contemptible criminal, a dastardly traitor to his team, against which, through the agency of Herbert Rackliff, he had wagered money. It was not, however, the fact that he had made such a wager that troubled him most, although at this moment, deep down in his heart, he was sincerely ashamed of that.

The principal cause of his misery, the reason why he kept telling himself over and over that he was a cowardly sneak, was his knowledge that the playing signals of the visitors had been betrayed to the home team, and that, taking advantage of the knowledge thus obtained, Wyndham was prepared to block Oakdale's every play, and

was doing this in a manner which appeared to the average spectator like almost uncanny foresight and cleverness at the game.

In the very first inning, with only one out and a runner on third, the Oakdale batter, taking his instructions from Captain Eliot, had walked out to the plate with the bat held in his right hand, handle downward, which was the signal for the squeeze play. But Wyndham had known what was coming quite as well as Oakdale, and Newbert, pitching the ball beyond the batsman's reach, gave the catcher every chance to get the runner as he came lunging hopelessly toward the pan.

The second inning, also, had opened promisingly for Oakdale, but the enemy's knowledge of the meaning of those signals had made it a simple matter to bring that auspicious opening to a fruitless and discouraging close.

Meanwhile Wyndham got a run in the first, and in the third she pushed two more happy fellows over the rubber, aided by errors; for Grant was pitching in excellent form, and not a tally of the three was really earned.

The sight of Roy Hooker, wearing Springer's own suit and sitting on the bench as a spare pitcher, did not serve in any way to make Phil more comfortable. He knew that by every bond of loyalty and decency he should be there himself when he was not working on the slab. Like some other fellows, in the past he had occasionally laughed and joked about Roy's aspirations to become a pitcher; but now, at last having gotten his eyes open to some of his faults, and having succeeded in restraining his jealousy of others who were in some respects his superiors, Hooker was pursuing a course that had already led him to be accepted in place of the deserter.

Phil held himself aloof from the crowd of sympathizers with the team who had come over from Oakdale to root for the crimson; he did not even wear the school colors. When he saw them waving their bright banners and heard them cheering he thought, with a heavy heart and no feeling of satisfaction, that they little knew how utterly useless their enthusiasm was. The game was fixed; the cards were stacked, and there was no chance for Oakdale to win.

He bit his lip as he saw Grant working steadily and coolly on the slab, doing splendidly, little dreaming that, as the situation stood, he might "wallop his wing off" with scarcely a ghost of a prospect that Oakdale could overcome the lead the locals had already obtained.

"I'm glad—as far as *he* is concerned," Springer whispered to himself; "but I'm sus-sorry for the rest of the fellows. It's a rotten piece of business, and Rackliff ought to be ashamed of himself."

Where was Rackliff? He knew Herbert had come to Wyndham after changing his clothes for dry ones, following his rescue from the river by Grant, but Phil had not put eyes on the fellow since his arrival on the scene of the game. It seemed very strange that Rackliff should not be somewhere on hand to watch the progress of the contest.

"One thing is sure," was the promise the unhappy youth made himself, "I'll tell him just what I think of him when I get a good chance, and I won't mum-mince my words. Oh, I wish I'd

never let him have that money to bet on Wyndham! If I hadn't done that——"

He stopped short, thinking that, even though he had not wagered his money, his hatred for Rod Grant and his desire to see the fellow pitch a losing game would be sufficient to keep him silent concerning the betrayal of the signals. He sought to convince himself that, as he was not concerned in that wretched piece of work, he was in no way responsible. His rebellious conscience, however, kept prodding him with the knowledge that he was "an accessory to the crime."

Again and again he longed to rise and shout a warning to Eliot—yearned to tell him loudly, that all might hear, that Wyndham knew Oakdale's signals. If he were to do such a thing as that—do it dramatically before that great crowd—would it not serve to restore him to sudden popularity with the fellows who now held him in contempt because of the petty, peevish, jealous course he had pursued?

"I wish they'd ha-hammer Grant out," he muttered. "If they'd only do that, I'd warn Eliot.

Of course I wouldn't give it away that I knew abub-bout the crookedness all the time, for that would queer me worse than ever. I've got to kuk-keep that a dark secret, sure enough."

He wondered what explanation he could make if he should warn Eliot; surely he would have to tell how he came to believe that Wyndham was wise to the signals of her opponents. There seemed only one reasonable story for him to put forward: he would be compelled to claim that he had overheard some persons in the crowd telling each other that such was the case.

And that would be a lie!

"I lied once on account of that fellow Grant, and got caught at it," thought Phil. "If I should tell Eliot now, Rackliff might—— But he doesn't know that I know he gave our signals to Wyndham. Still, if I come out publicly and warn Roger, Rackliff may get sore and blow around that part of the money he bet on Wyndham belonged to me."

Thus, wavering, tortured and miserable, he followed the progress of the game, realizing more and more as it went on that Oakdale had

absolutely no chance at all while the players of the other side could see and understand every batting and base-running signal that was given. Fighting against such odds without knowledge of the fact seemed to Phil to be a most outrageous thing, and he pledged himself that, from this day forward, he would have no more dealings with Rackliff.

As it was not necessary for the first batter in an inning to signal, Wyndham could not "lay for him" by the aid of knowledge gained in advance, and to open the fourth Sile Cane strode forth and fell on one of Newbert's slants, straightening it out handsomely for two sacks.

Grant, following, took his cue from Eliot and signalled Crane that he would bunt, on which sacrifice the lanky fellow was to take third.

Springer's teeth grated together as he beheld the entire Wyndham infield prepare to handle Rod's bunt, while Newbert drove Josh back and held him as close as possible to the second sack. Suddenly the ball was whipped over the pan, high and close, in spite of which the batter succeeded in sending it rolling heavily into the diamond.

But Newbert, racing forward as soon as the sphere left his fingers, scooped it cleanly with one hand and snapped it across to third without straightening up. The baseman was covering the sack in a position to get the long-geared runner, and, catching the ball, he put it on to Crane with considerable viciousness as Josh slid.

"Out at third!" shouted the umpire, with upflung hand.

The attempted sacrifice had been turned into a miserable failure solely because the locals had known precisely what their opponents would try to do.

"I can't stand much more of this!" groaned Springer aloud. "It's worse than robbery! I'll have to get out."

Hearing the words, a rejoicing Wyndham sympathizer slapped him heavily on the shoulder.

"Don't take it so hard," laughingly advised the familiar fellow. "It's just what everybody expected."

"Oh, is that so?" snapped Phil resentfully, turning his head to look up at the chap. "Well,

if this was a square game they might get their expectations stepped on."

"A square game!" retorted the other. "What do you mean by that? What's the matter with it? So far, it's the cleanest game I've seen this year."

"It's the dirtiest game I ever saw! It's cuc-crooked from the start. Oakdale hasn't a sus-show."

"Of course she hasn't; she's outclassed. You Oakdalers are poor losers; you always squeal."

"Outclassed—nothing!" fumed Phil. "Oakdale is playing just as good baseball as Wyndham—and playing it on the level."

"And by that I suppose you mean that Wyndham isn't playing on the level?"

"You don't have to gug-guess twice; that's what I mean."

"Oh, go crawl into your hole! There hasn't been a kick. Anybody can see that we're playing all round you simply because we've got the best team. Dade Newbert is a dandy."

"Yes, he's a dandy at this sort of baseball. I happen to know just what he is, and a fellow

who'll do what he's dud-done to win this game hasn't any right to pitch on a respectable nine."

"You're dotty. Look here, you better be careful about shooting off that sort of talk, or you may have a chance to prove it."

"I can bub-back up anything I've said," declared Phil, now thoroughly aroused. "I'm dead onto the whole dirty deal. If I should tell Roger Eliot what I know you'd sus-see a change in the complexion of this game in short order."

"Oh, really!" scoffed the incredulous Wyndhamite. "If you know so much, why don't you tell it? If you know anything that amounts to anything, you'll tell it—unless you're crooked yourself."

That cut deeply, and Springer choked back further heated words which were boiling to his lips. What right had he to rail against Newbert? Under the circumstances, his failure to warn his former teammates made him fully as dishonest and deserving of contempt as the Wyndham pitcher—far more so. The white anger of his face turned to a crimson flush of shame.

Silenced, he saw Wyndham, ready to block the hit and run, take Cooper's zipping grounder and turn into a double play what possibly might otherwise have been a safety. In that moment Springer's mind was made up, and he immediately left his seat on the bleachers.

"I'll tell Eliot the truth at any cost," he muttered.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHEN THE SIGNALS WERE CHANGED.

While Phil Springer was making his way round to the Oakdale side of the field an accident took place. The first Wyndham batter to face Grant in that inning hit the ball squarely and hard, driving it on a dead line toward the pitcher, but a trifle to his right. Grant might have dodged, but, instead of that, he tried to catch that red-hot liner with his bare right hand, and the ball split two of his fingers. Nevertheless, he stopped it, caught it up with his left hand when it fell to the ground, and tossed it to Sile Crane at first in time for a put-out.

Rod showed his blood-streaming hand to the umpire, who promptly called "time." Then the Texan walked toward the bench, Eliot running to join him.

"How bad are you hurt, old man?" asked the captain anxiously.

"I don't know," was the answer. "Didn't know I was hurt at all until I saw the claret spouting; reckoned my paw was benumbed a bit, and that was all."

But when water was poured over those bleeding fingers and Roger saw just what had happened to them, he turned quickly to Hooker, saying in a low tone:

"Get a ball, Hook, and warm up. You'll have to pitch the game out."

A doctor pressed through the crowd that had surrounded the injured player.

"Fix these busted fingers up quick, doc," urged Grant, "so I can get back into the game without delaying things too long."

"You'll play no more baseball to-day, my boy," said the physician; "nor for some days to come. You're out of it, and you may as well accept the alternative with good grace."

And so Springer saw Hooker go in to pitch, aware that only for his jealousy and blind folly he would have been the one called upon to replace the injured chap.

"Serves me right," he muttered. Which was proof sufficient that he was getting his eyes open.

Naturally, Hooker was very nervous, although secretly elated by the opportunity to pitch in this most important game. Eliot talked with him a moment or two about signals, finishing by placing a hand on his shoulder and saying:

"Now, keep cool, Hook, and take your time. Mind my signals, and do your best for control. It's your chance to show the stuff that's in you. Don't be afraid of Wyndham, and don't listen to the crowd. Close your ears and eyes to everything outside of the game. You may surprise yourself and everybody else, if you keep your head."

There was something in Roger's words and manner that proved very steadying to Roy, and he toed the slab with an outward show of confidence, whether or not he was inwardly perturbed. The majority of the Oakdale players were much cast down, however, and it was a rather feeble and heartless cheer that the rooters with the crimson banners gave the substitute pitcher.

Hooker pitched two balls wide, and then put

one over, which the batsman hit, rolling a grounder into the diamond for Chipper Cooper to handle. Chipper managed to get it and wing it across to Crane for a clean put-out.

"Two gone, fellows," called Eliot. "We'll keep right on playing baseball. Get this next man, now."

The next man hoisted a long fly to center, where Ben Stone, sure as fate, took charge of it; and Hooker, now really quite calm and confident, jogged to the bench.

"See if you can't start something, Sleuth," urged Roger as Piper found his bat. "We've got to make some runs pretty soon, and we may as well begin now."

Springer, walking swiftly out to the bench, spoke Eliot's name. "I want a few words with you, Roger," he said; "I've gug-gug-got something—something important to—to tell you." He stumbled more than usual over his words, and his face was very pale; but his manner was resolute and determined.

A slight frown fell on the face of the Oakdale captain as he turned his eyes upon the speaker.

"What is it, Springer?" he asked almost repellantly.

"Just sus-step one side a bit so I can tell you without anybody else hearing," begged Phil.

Roger complied, lending an ear to the startling information Springer had to impart, but, after his usual composure, retaining his self-possessed atmosphere to such a degree that scarcely any one who chanced to be watching them could have dreamed how disturbing that information really was.

"How do you happen to know about this, Phil?" Eliot asked.

"Don't ask me. I can't tut-tell you now. But it's dead straight, Roger, and Oakdale hasn't a ghost of a show as long as you continue to stick by those signals."

"We'll change them right away."

Piper had succeeded in bumping a slow grounder into the diamond, on which he scudded for first with amazing speed, for he was really a splendid sprinter. The ball was handled a bit too slowly, giving the Oakdale lad time to reach the sack by the narrowest margin.

"Never mind that, fellows," grinned Orv Foxhall from his position at second. "I'll get him when he comes down this way. He may be pretty speedy, but——"

"He won't run off the bridge," cried Cooper, on the coaching line. "Your speed has made you pawn things more than once, and now you've gone and soaked your daddy's automobubble."

"Bright boy," scoffed Foxhall. "I always enjoy it when you make a choke, but I'd enjoy it more if you'd make one that would finish you."

Sile Crane came running down from the bench, catching Cooper by the shoulders and whispering something into his ear. Chipper looked surprised, and then, as Crane was jogging back, in violation of the rules, the coacher ran out to first, grabbed Piper and whispered to him.

"Hey?" gasped Sleuth, staring at Chub Tuttle, who was walking to the plate with his bat held in a manner which seemed to indicate that he would bunt the ball. "What's the——"

"Shut up!" hissed Chipper. "Mind! Get a lead now! Be ready!" Then he skipped back

over the chalk-mark before the umpire could order him back.

The Wyndham infielders crept forward, crouching and ready. Newbert, contemptuous of Tuttle's skill as a batter, handed up an easy one. Instead of bunting, the fat lad rapped out a little fly, that sailed over the heads of the in-drawn infielders, and Cooper, having obtained a good start, went twinkling over second and on to third.

Wyndham had been deceived, much to the annoyance of the local players, who looked at one another inquiringly. It was rather remarkable that Tuttle had not followed his own signal, plainly given. It was possible, however, that, seeing the infielders prepared to take his bunt, the fellow had decided at the last moment to do something else.

Nelson followed Tuttle, and he held his bat in a manner that seemed to proclaim he would "take one," giving Chub a chance to try to steal second on the first ball pitched. Believing this was the program, Newbert whipped over a beautiful straight ball for a called strike.

But Nelson did not let that handsome one pass;

it was just the kind he liked, and he fell on it with great glee, smashing a liner into the outfield, between right and center.

Piper, laughing, scored at a jog trot; while Tuttle, his fists clenched, his eyes glaring, his cheeks puffed out like toy balloons, galloped over the sacks with all the grace of a frightened elephant.

"Score, Chub—score!" shrieked Crane, who had pranced down onto the coaching line back of third, and who was waving his long arms grotesquely. "Make it or bust! You kin do it!"

Tuttle continued to the plate, where, raising a great cloud of dust, he arrived on an attempted slide, a moment ahead of the ball, being declared safe.

The Wyndham crowd was filled with dismay; the Oakdalers with the crimson banners were leaping and shrieking on the bleachers. The local players knew something was wrong, and they showed the greatest confusion and consternation. Dade Newbert was making some remarks that would not look well in print.

Captain Eliot had instructed his players to

abandon the use of signals for the time being, and to bat and run bases wholly as their judgment might dictate, and this sudden change threatened totally to demoralize the Wyndhamites.

Not a man was out, and the visitors, having already secured two tallies, had a runner moored at third. Berlin Barker stepped forth briskly, urging the umpire to keep the game in motion, his bat held as if he intended to try for a safe bingle. As matters stood, it seemed logical that he should do this, and the Wyndhamites got ready for him.

But Berlin, trusting the speedy Nelson to take advantage of it, bunted the first ball. His confidence in Nelson was not misplaced, Jack sprinting to the plate, while the baffled home players bestirred themselves too late even to get Barker, whose bunt went for a safe hit.

The score was tied.

Foxhall, rushing up to Newbert, whispered excitedly:

"They've changed their signals! That's what's fooling us. We've got to——"

There was a yell. Observing that second base was left practically unguarded, Barker scooted down from first, and he got there ahead of the shortstop, who made an effort to cover the sack.

"This is a great year for high flying," laughingly whooped Cooper. "Ten thousand feet in an aeroplane isn't so much; why, this whole Wyndham bunch is up in the air higher than that this very minute. They're liable to come down hard, too."

Like Foxhall, the Wyndham captain had decided that Oakdale was no longer using the known code of batting and base-running signals, and he made haste to warn his players to place no further reliance upon the information they had obtained concerning those signals.

"We want another run to take the lead, Stoney," said Eliot as Ben stepped into the batter's box.

Stone took in the situation and also did the unexpected, dropping another bunt in front of the pan. The catcher got the ball in time to throw Stone out, but the batter's object was obtained, for Barker had sailed along to third.

The Oakdaleites on the seats implored Eliot to get a hit, and Roger responded by cutting a grounder through into short right field, which let Barker score and placed the visitors in the lead.

Newbert's face was white as chalk. Up to this inning he had been insolent in his self-confidence and contempt for the visitors, but the strain now put upon him proved too much, and he hit Crane in the ribs, following with a pass to Hooker, which filled the corners.

Then, amid the tumultuous cheering and laughter of the Oakdale crowd, Captain Holley sent Newbert to the bench and called Twitt Crowell forth to take his place.

CHAPTER XXIX

PHIL GETS HIS EYES OPEN

"Too bad little Herbie Rackliff isn't here to witness the fate of his chum, the wonderful pitcher from Boston," laughed Jack Nelson.

"Where is Rackliff?" questioned Stone.

"Why, don't you know? He's sick abed; just went down flat after reaching this town, and had to have a doctor."

With the bases full, Chipper Cooper longed for a handsome clean drive; but fortune seemed to favor Crowell, for when Chipper did hit the ball he simply rolled it straight at the man on the slab, who scooped it and snapped it back to the catcher with Eliot only a little more than halfway down the line from third. Taking the ball, with one foot on the plate, the catcher hummed it past Cooper's ear to first, completing a double play.

Of course the downcast Wyndhamites awoke

and cheered, but the visitors, although disappointed by the abrupt ending of their "streak," felt very well satisfied.

"Now keep steady and play the game, boys," called Eliot. "This is the game we want to win."

Springer, literally a-tingle with joy over the turn the game had taken, watched Hooker, who was given excellent support, pull through the fifth without letting more than one man reach first base.

"I'm glad," muttered Phil. "I don't care if it does cost me seven dollars, for Wyndham deserves to be beaten."

Eliot, removing his cage at the end of the inning, looked for Springer and found him. "Come here, Phil," he called, beckoning.

Phil hesitated, more than half disposed to pretend that he did not hear and to get away from that locality at once; but, realizing he would find it necessary to face Roger's questions sooner or later, he finally plucked up courage to answer the summons. Greatly to his relief, the captain of the nine did not question him then; instead of that, Roger said:

"I'm much obliged to you, old fellow, for putting me wise, although I'm ashamed that I didn't tumble to the fact myself. I hope we can win this game now; we must win it somehow. Grant is knocked out for some time to come, and there's only Hooker left to depend on. If anything happens to Hook, it's all off; there's no one to take his place."

Suddenly Phil understood what Roger was driving at, and his pale face flamed with color. "If I can——" he began eagerly, and then stopped, choking a bit.

"I thought so!" exclaimed Roger, with great satisfaction; "I thought you must be still loyal and true. I've got to pay close attention to the run of the game. Won't you find Grant and ask him to let you have his suit? Get into it as soon as you can, and hurry back here; for Wyndham is liable to solve Hook's delivery any minute. Hustle, old chap—do."

With this admonition, he turned to give his attention to his players.

"Still loyal and true!" muttered Phil. "If he only knew the truth! Well, I suppose he'll find

out before long, for Rackliff will blow on me. I'll have to face it, that's all. I wonder wh-where Grant is."

A few moments later he found the fellow he was seeking, the doctor having just finished bandaging Rod's injured fingers. Springer hesitated, feeling that it was almost impossible for him to approach the Texan, and, as he was wavering, Grant, still wearing his playing suit, started for the Oakdale bench.

"I—I bub-beg your pardon," stammered Phil as Rodney was passing.

"Oh!" exclaimed the young Texan, stopping short. "Is it you—Phil? What's the matter?"

"I—want—your—suit." Springer could not meet Rod's eyes, and he could feel his cheeks burning; for over him had swept a full and complete understanding of his own folly in permitting jealousy to lead him into the course he had been pursuing.

"My—my suit?" said Rod, as if he did not quite understand. "You——"

"Eliot sus-sent me for it," Phil hastened to explain. "You know he hasn't a spare man on the

bench now, and if anything should happen to another pup-player——"

"Come on," said Rod, turning sharply. "The dressing room is over back of the seats here."

In the dressing room Grant got out of the playing suit as quickly as possible, while Springer stripped off his street clothes and unhesitatingly donned each piece as it was tossed to him. Both were silent, for the situation was such that neither could seem to find words to fit it. However, having put on Rod's clothes down to the brass-clipped pitching shoes and being on the point of leaving the Texan struggling slowly into his everyday garments, Phil stopped and half turned, after taking a step toward the door.

"I'm sus-sorry you got your fingers busted," he stated in a low tone.

"Thanks," returned Rod, without looking up.

"He despises me," whispered Springer, as soon as he was outside. "Well, perhaps I deserve it."

At the end of the tiered seats he came upon Herbert Rackliff, who had just arrived at the field. Herbert's eyes widened on beholding

Springer in that suit. His face was pale save for two burning spots upon his hollow cheeks.

"What the dickens does this mean?" exclaimed Rackliff, his wondering eyes flashing over Phil from head to heels.

"Nothing," was the answer, "only Grant's hurt, and I'm going onto the bub-bench as spare man —at Eliot's request."

An odd smile twisted Rackliff's lips. "Now wouldn't that kill you dead!" he coughed. "At Eliot's request! Ha! ha! ha! If he only knew! But of course he doesn't suspect, for I haven't given you away. Well, this is a joke!"

"I'm in a hurry, so I'll hustle along."

"Wait a jiffy. I've just got here. Sort of went to pieces after landing in this town, and they stowed me in bed, with a pill-slinger looking at my tongue, taking my pulse and asking a lot of tiresome questions. He even sounded my lungs, though I protested against it. And then he told me I was to stay in bed, and left a lot of nasty medicine for me to take. I stayed in bed as long as I could, knowing this game was going on. Now that I'm here, how does it stand?"

"Your great pup-pitcher, Newbert, was batted out in the fifth inning."

"What's that? I don't believe it!"

"It's a fact."

"The score—what's the score?"

"It was four to three in Oakdale's favor at the end of the fifth."

"Rotten!" snarled Herbert, and a tempestuous burst of coughing shook him frightfully.

When Phil started away the still coughing lad grasped his arm and restrained him.

"You—you wait!" gasped Rackliff. "Wyndham must win this game—she just must, that's all. Did you say Grant was hurt?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Enough to knock him out; he got two fingers busted by a liner hot from the bub-bat."

"Good! Then I suppose that dub Hooker is pitching now?"

"Yes."

"Well, if I had any more money I'd be willing to bet the limit that Wyndham gets to him, all right. He'll get his."

"Perhaps not. He fuf-finished the fifth in style."

"He'll get his," repeated Herbert positively. "Then you'll be run in. That's why Eliot wants you. That will fix things beautifully. You know what to do."

"Yes, I know what to do," said Phil slowly, "and I shall do it if I get the chance."

"That's the talk! You can do it cleverly enough so no one will suspect that you're throwing the game, and we'll win——"

"If I'm put in to pitch," said Springer, still uttering his words in that slow and positive manner, "I shall do my level best to hold Wyndham down and give Oakdale a chance to win the game."

"You—you'll what?" spluttered Rackliff incredulously. "Why, you're joking! Your money, seven dollars which you gave me, is bet on Wyndham. If Oakdale wins you lose the seven."

"If I could do anything to help Oakdale win, I'd do it, even if I stood to lose seven hundred dollars by it," declared Phil.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE GREATEST VICTORY.

The sixth inning was over before Springer reached the Oakdale bench. He found the boys in high spirits, for they had gathered two more tallies by taking Crowell's measure, while again Hooker had pulled through without being scored upon, which made the scorers' record six to three in favor of the visitors at the beginning of the seventh. Oakdale seemed to have the game bagged.

When the seventh passed with the score unchanged on either side and Hooker apparently "still going strong," it began to look as if Springer would get no chance to do any pitching in that game. But baseball is sometimes most uncertain, which is one reason why the game is so popular in America. In the last of the eighth, with one man gone, the locals finally took Hooker's measure and began batting him to all quarters of the

field. Almost before the gasping, excited spectators could realize it, Wyndham had made one run and the bases were all occupied, with one of the strongest hitters of the home team at bat.

Springer had limbered up, with Stone catching him, in the first of the seventh while Oakdale was at bat, and now Eliot stepped upon the plate, giving a signal which meant that Roy was to retire and Phil was to take his place.

Phil was sorry for Hooker, who showed that he was fearfully upset and chagrined, and, as he passed the unlucky pitcher on his way out to the firing line, he said in a low, sympathetic tone:

"Don't you care, old ch-chap. It happens to the best of us; I got mine in that Barville game, you know. Next time you'll make good."

But could he now "make good" himself? That was the question, of a most disturbing sort, which insinuated itself upon Springer as he stepped into position and received the ball from Captain Eliot. The anxious Oakdale crowd gave him a cheer.

"There's Springer!" he heard a voice shout. "He'll stop it. Hold 'em, Phil—hold 'em!"

THE LOCAL CROWD "ROOTED" HARD — PAGE 307.

"I must, and I will," thought Phil.

Eliot smiled on him encouragingly as he adjusted the cage and stepped back into position, crouching to give a signal. The Wyndham coachers began chattering, and the local crowd "rooted" hard. Surely it was a moment to test the nerve of any young pitcher.

Phil caught Roger's signal, nodded, and bent the first ball over. The batter hit it to the left of the pitcher, and Springer, shooting out his gloved hand, simply deflected the ball enough to prevent Nelson, who was almost directly in line, from getting it. The Wyndham crowd yelled madly as another runner scored and the hitter reached first safely.

"This pitcher's the easiest one yet!" shrieked one of the coachers. "Nail the game right here, fellows. It's easy! it's easy!"

Fear sought to fasten its benumbing clutch upon Springer. What if he could not stop Wyndham? Rackliff would hear that he had warned Eliot about the signals, and, seeking retaliation, would betray the fact that he had likewise wagered money that Wyndham would win. To every-

body it must seem that Phil had at last shown himself thoroughly despicable and untrustworthy by betraying his own team on the field. This thought actually made him sick and giddy for a moment.

"Never mind, Spring—never mind," Eliot was saying. "That was an accident; it wasn't a hit. Get the next man; get this fellow. You can do it."

"I must, and I will!" thought Phil once more.

He shook off the touch of fear and steadied himself. Again Eliot gave a signal, and again he nodded. Strangely enough, the next batter hit a liner to the left of Springer, almost precisely as the other had done; but this time the pitcher's gloved fingers caught and held the ball, following which he instantly turned and snapped it to first base before the runner, who had started down the line, could get back.

It was a double play, and a mighty shout of joy was flung forth from beneath the fluttering crimson banners of the Oakdale spectators. Again Phil was cheered.

"Well done, Spring," complimented Eliot quietly, as Phil reached the bench.

Then Herbert Rackliff, pale and desperate, rushed forth to the bench, catching Eliot's arm and saying:

"Perhaps you're not aware that Mr. Springer has bet money on this game. He has bet money that Wyndham will win. If you don't believe me, ask him."

Roger turned to Phil. "Is this true?"

"Yes," was the husky answer, "it's true. I gave this sus-sneaking blabber seven dollars to bet on Wyndham, and I'll never gug-get over being ashamed of it as long as I live. He's the creature who gave away our signals to Wyndham. I hope I lose that mum-money, and, if you'll trust me, I'll do my level best to make myself lose it."

The Oakdale captain turned on Rackliff. "Get off the field," he ordered sternly. "Get back where you belong, and be quick about it."

Herbert retired, his last remaining hope being that Phil would go to pieces in the ninth.

But Springer was strengthened and steadied

by a great desire, and, although Oakdale's lead was not increased, he pitched so well that the slender margin was sufficient to give the visitors the victory. Not a Wyndhamite reached first, and two of the three who faced Springer were mowed down on strikes.

The overjoyed Oakdale crowd charged onto the diamond and surrounded the winners as they were giving Wyndham a cheer. Springer was swept off his feet and caught up on the shoulders of the crowd, who bellowed his name again and again. Looking downward, he saw that his right leg rested on the shoulder of Rodney Grant, who was cheering madly.

In the dressing room, a little later, Grant came up quietly and put forth his uninjured left hand.

"Put it there, partner," he begged. "You sure turned the trick, and you held them down handsomely. It was a great victory."

Springer seized the proffered hand, laughing to hide the fact that joy threatened to blind his eyes with tears.

"It was a great victory," he agreed, thinking, however, of the victory he had won over himself.

"Sure," beamed the Texan. "And now Oakdale ought to win the championship; she ought to win it with you and me—and Hooker, for pitchers." He said this laughing in a way that robbed his words of any touch of egotism.

Oakdale did win the championship, without the loss of a single game. Grant and Springer did the greater part of the pitching, the work being divided almost equally between them; but Hooker was not wholly forgotten, and he obtained some opportunities, actually pitching one complete game in a most creditable manner.

Herbert Rackliff saw no more baseball after the Wyndham game, for his parents were notified that he had contracted a pronounced case of pulmonary trouble, and, this being confirmed later by the family physician, he was hurriedly shipped to Colorado, in hopes that the dry and bracing atmosphere of that State might restore him to health. Although the boys of Oakdale charitably refrained from making much talk about him, he was little missed by them.

THE END.

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